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June 2023

the magic lantern Gazette

collecting... projecting... and sharing

WHAT IS A MAGIC LANTERN?

See article inside

Magic Lantern Society of the United States and Canada

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Hoping we may be favoured with your esteemed orders in due course.

Yours faithfully
R.G.Wood. Jr.

Ref. JEA/GB.

See article on Page 24

Editorial

Well, the question has been asked many times - "What is a magic lantern?" and I guess most of us have a stock answer and pass on to the next question. However when the question is rephrased into "What is a magic lantern to *you*?" it is rather thought provoking and we hope to share a few thoughts with you in this issue. It has to be observed that not all lanterns were created equal - but there was something for everybody's use and purse! It has certainly been interesting to us here looking afresh at the huge variety of lanterns that were on the market, from the enormous mahogany 'professional' triple lantern in its wooden box (needing two people to lift and carry it) through the lodge lanterns to the Mickey Mouse flashlight lantern with its children's slides. One answer which sprang to mind was 'It's a fire hazard'. Prior to the electric light source the use of flame and oil and the later oxygen and hydrogen mixtures led to many conflagrations, including the Rhodes Opera House in America where 170 people lost their lives (10% of the town's population) and the fire at the Charity Bazaar in Paris in 1897, covered in the Magic Lantern Gazette Volume 32 No. 2, where 126 people died and 200 were injured. These were huge tragedies, but judging from our lantern collection, there were domestic conflagrations too. It is surprising how many of the lanterns have signs of charred woodwork or distorted metal around the back door and an odor of smoke.

I remember being horrified when reading biographies of famous people, several of them detailed how, as children, they were sent into the basement of their homes with a children's magic lantern, kerosene oil and matches to entertain their friends! None of those I read recorded anything untoward - yet given the numbers of lanterns sold as Christmas presents I cannot believe that all the recipients were as trustworthy and responsible as their parents thought!

Almost with a sigh of relief one passes on to the Stereopticon and the rather safer electrical illuminants, though electric shock was an ever-present possibility. Additionally, as Ron Easterday points out in his article, public building safety had been upgraded and fire escape safety addressed by tighter regulations, so the cinemas were safer places to spend time and enjoy entertainment, at least they were if the early nitrate film did not spontaneously combust!

Our thanks go to Brian Rogers for compiling the diary of magic lantern events for the summer and to Matthew Schnittker for sharing his experiences in recreating high quality reproductions of 'The Raven' - a popular Boggs Beale set of slides. Thanks also to Terry and Debbie Borton for their invaluable contributions to the Gazette and to our success as lanternists via Terry's Tips. Sadly, we have completed the Tips in this issue. As one of the most experienced and successful lanternists of this century it is wonderful that he has captured so much of his wealth of experience for our members via our journal.

We have included various items from the Riley Collection, scattered throughout the pages of this issue. We are still sorting out the multitude of documents etc within the collection.

STOP PRESS: After compiling the article on the Victor Animatograph Company, further information has emerged from the Riley Collection. Expect Part 2 in the next Gazette!

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President's Message

Concerns about the size of our membership and its future trend are something we will need to pay attention to from year to year. As of Mid-May 2023 our membership stands at over 100 duly paid members, only a little shy of what it was at the end of 2022. Will that number continue to be stable or even increase, or are we in danger of losing a significant amount of members anytime soon?

The Magic Lantern Society of the U.S. & Canada has maintained its membership without any major change for the past two decades. Compared to many other societies and organizations which experienced a significant decline in membership we are doing well.

On the other hand there is currently no reason to believe that our society will see any substantial growth in the near future. Interest in Magic Lantern related topics is widespread, perhaps more so now than twenty years ago, but there is no promising sign that this general interest will turn into a substantial increase in membership at present.

Apart from the size of our membership there also are concerns about an increase in age of the society's members overall. Since we don't ask for your age it is difficult to assess where we stand in terms of age distribution. My own guesstimate based on attending conventions would be that the majority of our membership is between 35-85 years of age, with an average age somewhere in the 60's range. Perhaps not a very promising group for a coach aiming for gold at the next Olympics, but we are not of that kind. While some of us would not mind being younger and in prime shape, the society does not require it nor is it necessary for being active and successful in what we do.

So, are we in danger of becoming too old? Are there not enough younger members joining? It's a relevant point, but difficult to evaluate or predict, not only because we don't have firm data, but also because things can change quickly in both directions for a variety of reasons and without all that much control on our part. To give an example, if within one year six or seven members below the age of 40 join the society, then we all would not only happily receive them, we would also take it as a good sign. If the same people leave a year later, we would feel rather devastated and begin to fear for some terrible trend to set in. In other words, a few members can make a significant impact on our society's demographics, its activity, and future outlook.

Consequently we need to be aware of where we stand, keep an eye on what's happening, see what can be done to retain those who have joined, and hopefully also find ways to attract more interest in becoming a contributing member of the Magic Lantern Society of the United States and Canada.

Thank you all for joining, for renewing your membership, for your continued support, and for all you are doing to make our society a welcoming, engaging, and enjoyable experience.

Karl Link
President

Forthcoming Events

July 6-9, 2023, ***Alice in Wonderland,*** real vintage magic lantern show using a rare complete set of projector slides from 1905, Duston Community Centre, Pendle Road, Northampton, NN6 6DT UK.

July 22, 2023, ***Summer Meeting 2023,*** Magic Lantern Society, Lacey Green Millenium Hall, Main Road, Lacey Green HP27 0QN, Buckinghamshire, England, UK.

For more see page 28.

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What IS a magic lantern?

Karl Link tries to come up with a definition

What's a Magic Lantern?

Who hasn't heard that question before? You probably heard it a hundred times or more. We all know the answer. OK, so a Magic Lantern (ML) is an antique slide projector.

Really? Is that all there is to it? Of course not, but what else can you say? After years of living with this increasingly unsatisfactory answer, I finally decided to try to come up with something better to say. As it turns out, things are not as simple as I believed them to be, and in this article you can read about what I found out.

I start with our familiar question as above, and for an answer I use commonly available sources of information. Surprisingly, that answer can be quite different, depending on who or where you are turning to for information. Let's have a look at some of these answers.

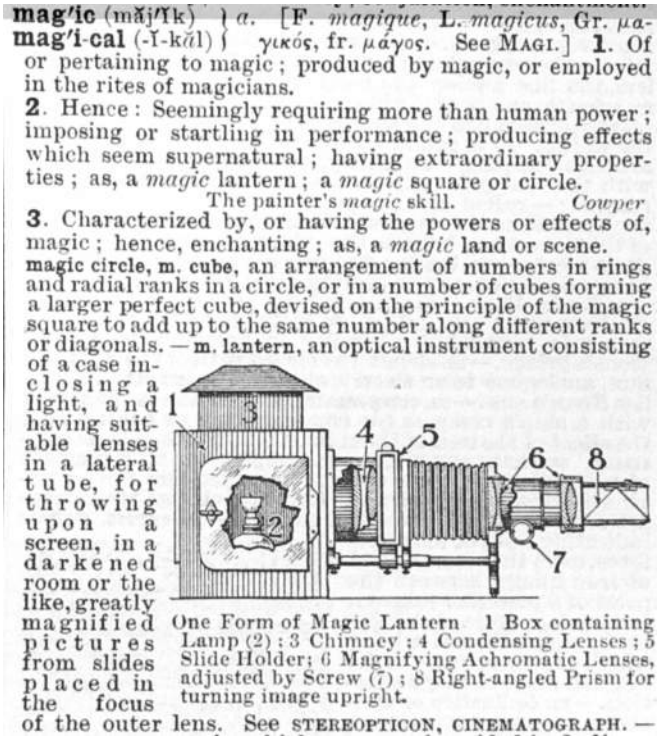
1.1. Webster's Dictionary

If you take a standard dictionary chances are you will find, in one form or another, our familiar standard answer. Here is one example from Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language - Second College Edition 1986 (David B. Guralnik Editor-in-Chief), where it says under Magic Lantern: "Old-Fashioned term for a projector for showing still pictures from transparent slides."

Nothing new here; the only unexpected piece of information about this answer is that the ML is still mentioned in a 1986 dictionary. Call it the common answer or answer C, and shorten it to ML = Some Kind of Old Projector.

1.2. Dutch Perspectives

Perhaps you will like the next answer much better: "A working magic lantern is a projection apparatus that consists of at least the following parts, arranged in this order: a light source of any type; a translucent picture, placed in front of the light; and a positive lens, placed in such a way that it creates an inverted image of the translucent picture, at some distance away from the transparency. Any piece of equipment that does not share these properties is not a magic lantern; any claimed invention of a magic lantern not sharing all these properties is invalid… a ML slide is any form of translucent picture, usually painted on glass, which can slide over a stage, or by means of a carrier, and is intended to be used for projection in the arrangement of a magic lantern as defined above." (Wagenaar W.A., Duller A., Wagenaar-Fischer M., Dutch Perspectives (2014), The Magic Lantern Society, London, page 7ff).



mag'ic (măj'ĭk) } *a.* [F. *magique*, L. *magicus*, Gr. *μα-*
mag'i-cal (-ĭ-kăl) } *γικός*, fr. *μάγος*. See MAGI.] **1.** Of or pertaining to magic; produced by magic, or employed in the rites of magicians.
2. Hence: Seemingly requiring more than human power; imposing or startling in performance; producing effects which seem supernatural; having extraordinary properties; as, a *magic* lantern; a *magic* square or circle.
The painter's *magic* skill. *Cowper*
3. Characterized by, or having the powers or effects of, magic; hence, enchanting; as, a *magic* land or scene.
magic circle, m. cube, an arrangement of numbers in rings and radial ranks in a circle, or in a number of cubes forming a larger perfect cube, devised on the principle of the magic square to add up to the same number along different ranks or diagonals. — **m. lantern,** an optical instrument consisting of a case inclosing a light, and having suitable lenses in a lateral tube, for throwing upon a screen, in a darkened room or the like, greatly magnified pictures from slides placed in the focus of the outer lens. See STEREOPTICON, CINEMATOGRAPH. —

One Form of Magic Lantern 1 Box containing Lamp (2); 3 Chimney; 4 Condensing Lenses; 5 Slide Holder; 6 Magnifying Achromatic Lenses, adjusted by Screw (7); 8 Right-angled Prism for turning image upright.

Fig 1: Magic Lantern, from Webster's Dictionary, 1911 edition.

I do like that one; it does make things much clearer, doesn't it? Too technical? Let's call it the technical answer T with ML = Three Part Highly Organized Projection Apparatus.

1.3. Wikipedia

Next let's take a look at the most universally used source of information worldwide today, Wikipedia, which (as of Mid-March 2023) has this to say about the ML: "The magic lantern, also known by its Latin name *laterna magica*, is an early type of image projector that used pictures - paintings, prints, or photographs - on transparent plates (usually made of glass), one or more lenses, and a light source. Because a single lens inverts an image projected through it (as in the phenomenon which inverts the image of a camera obscura), slides were inserted upside down in the magic lantern, rendering the projected image correctly oriented…"

Alright, that does sound a lot better than Wiki's short version: "Early type of image projector" (under disambiguation). Let's call Wiki's version answer W and shorten it to ML = Early Projector with Lens.

1.4. Encyclopedia Britannica

For my last example I am turning to a longtime standard, the Encyclopedia Britannica (15th edition, 1987), which not surprisingly does not have an entry for ML anywhere in either its Micropaedia or Macropaedia section. What it does have however is this very interesting piece of information: "The primary unit of expression in film is the image, or the single shot. The attribution of magical properties to images has a long history; this association is well documented among many primitive peoples, and is even reflected in the term magic lantern as a synonym for the film projector. Any image taken out of the everyday world and projected onto a screen to some extent appears to become magically transmuted. This magical quality helps to explain the enthusiastic reception accorded such early films as La Sortie des ouvriers de l'usine Lumiere ("Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory"), which were merely photographic records of commonplace scenes in Paris in the 1890s by the French film pioneers, the Lumiere brothers". (The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th ed., 1987, Macropedia, Vol. #24, pg. 407, The Art of Film - Qualities of the film image).

Fig 2:

A magic lantern - see End note 2.

What do you think of that one? Let's call it answer L (for Lumiere), and reduce it to ML = Magical Projector.

2. Now what?

Let's stop for a moment, because I am starting to get a little confused, don't you? Am I reading this right? What are these four answers telling me? Let's start over again, with our customary question from above, framed a little differently. This time I want to know: What exactly is a Magic Lantern?

Let us take a closer look at these four answers again, and see what exactly it is they are saying when they define a ML, or what exactly do they mean?

2.1. Closer Look at Answer C

On first glance C is a perfectly good answer. With a mere handful of words it describes a ML as an old projector, and its function as showing still pictures from transparent slides; ostensibly the two criteria which define a ML.

Answer C has a noticeable leaning towards emphasizing the function of a ML (projection of an image) over describing its construction or what a ML looks like. As far as the projector itself is concerned it does not provide any specific technical details. It limits a ML to being a projector of still pictures, moving picture projectors are excluded. If moveable transparent slides are acceptable is unclear (slip slides, chromatropes, and others). By specifying transparent slides, opaque projectors are excluded.

According to C any device capable of projecting a still image using a transparent picture may be termed a ML. In other words, any device which projects in whichever way a still image onto a screen is a ML. Taken to the extreme the sole condition for a ML is not its particular technical details, but that an image is produced.

In summary, C represents a common contemporary answer where a ML is a special kind of old projector. As a definition it is not very detailed, not very specific, and not overly technical. Specific parts, their order, or even a lens are not mentioned.

2.2. Closer Look at Answer T

This is a more technical answer, which clearly describes in detail what constitutes a ML. It also states what cannot be called a ML by excluding any device without these characteristics.

According to T a ML is a projection apparatus composed of a minimum of three different specified

components, all three of which are required. Their correct arrangement is of critical importance and definite. The three required parts and their order are: a light source, a translucent picture, and a positive lens. The type of lens, its function, and correct position are thoroughly described, because that too is an indispensable part of a ML.

The emphasis of T is on the apparatus and its strictly defined order. By its very nature T does limit the range of projectors which may be classified as a ML. A motion picture projector is (in principle) not excluded, unless T's definition of a ML slide is used in a very narrow sense.

In summary, T is a technical definition; detailed and specific. It defines a ML as a highly structured projection apparatus, and excludes any device without these same characteristics.

2.3. Closer Look at Answer W

This is what may be considered the most up-to-date answer, at least as far as its date goes. Answer W describes a ML as an early type of image projector, consisting of three components (pictures on transparent plates, lens or lenses, and a light source), but does not explicitly specify their arrangement. The type of pictures used in a ML is described in more detail. Additionally, image inversion by a single lens is described, making correctly oriented image insertion a significant characteristic of a ML. This, indirectly, requires a specific sequence of all three components, which can only be understood through prior knowledge of the relevant underlying technical principles.

Fig 3: A Magic Lantern. See End note 3.

The emphasis of answer W is the transparent picture, and only to a lesser degree the apparatus. Since W does not directly specify the exact order of its three components, it only indirectly excludes projectors with a condenser lens that do not use lenses for image projection. Film projectors are not absolutely ruled out unless the expression "transparent plates - usually made of glass" is used in a very narrow sense. Opaque projectors are positively excluded.

Fig 4: A magic lantern. See End note 4.

In summary, W is a somewhat technical definition, detailed only in parts. It defines a ML as an early three part device, which requires a specific transparent image orientation. A specific order of components is no more than implied.

2.4. Closer Look at Answer L

This is a somewhat surprising and indirect answer. It identifies a film projector as a ML and accordingly a ML as a (film) projector, which is the opposite of what answer C will permit (and even T or W, if applied restrictively).

Answer L mentions no technical details, but is focused

on the quality of a projected image. It emphasizes the significance of a certain magical quality which everyday images obtain when being projected onto a screen. Consequently any device capable of the same transmutation of images may be called a ML.

Fig 5: A magic lantern. See End note 5.

In summary, even though L is a definition, it does feel less like a definition than the other answers, because of its more ephemeral character. It seemingly has no pretensions to limiting itself. L refers to a ML as a magical instrument capable of image transmutation.

2.5. Comparison and Results of Answers C, T, W, and L

Comparing all four answers, one can notice that T is primarily concerned with technical aspects of the apparatus, W mainly with those of the transparent picture, while C and L are more focused on the projected image. All four answers C, T, W, and L, agree in that a ML is an apparatus which uses transparent pictures to project images. Beyond that, differences show up. Between these four answers there appears to exist some kind of disagreement or rather a lack of agreement on certain details. For instance a lens or optical system may or may not be a required part of a ML.

While all four answers agree that a ML is a projector, they do not agree on what kind of projector. While all four agree that an image is projected, they do not agree on exactly how it is projected.

Taken separately these four answers do not give us a clear comprehensive definition of what a ML is, but taken together they confirm three points. First, a ML is generally understood to be a special kind of projector. Secondly, the specific details of this special projector are somewhat ambiguous and open to debate. And third, a difference in definition may occur, depending on what an individual definition is primarily concerned with, for example the apparatus, or the projection of an image.

In other words we can perceive different ways of looking at a ML. Assume for example a situation where the perception of a ML is that of an image produced somehow by a "Black Box" whose technological details are essentially not of importance, as long as the apparatus works and the product (image) will appear with sufficient success and quality.

Alternatively we may view a ML as a technical machine whose components are clearly specified and understood, including the way an image is produced and how it will appear.

More technically orientated definitions like T make specific technical details a distinguishing feature, because T is intended as a tool to clarify a certain technological development. Less technically oriented definitions, like C and L for example, are equally capable of distinguishing different ways of projecting images; their criteria differ because they are intended to highlight a different aspect.

Each of these different approaches is valid and useful in its own way, depending on whether we wish for a more image oriented perspective, or if we have need for a more technology based viewpoint.

3. Overall Results and Conclusion

The ML is seen and experienced in different ways, and disagreements about what a ML is have persisted in some way or other. The concept of multiple simultaneously existing separate and different viewpoints is useful when trying to explain their existence and validity. It also helps to reconcile a number of misunderstandings, and to bring the ML into a wider view of image projection without losing sight of its own place and characteristics within that broader range.

3.1. The Three Terms_

The three terms most often used to describe a ML loosely are: projector, transparent picture, and projected image. Traditionally these were the necessary basic components to commonly define a ML, but they alone will not suffice to distinguish between the many different existing types of projectors using different types of projection systems. While these three terms confirm that a ML is some kind of projector, any given type of projector may or may not be a ML.

3.2. Additional or Different Parameters_

Only by using additional or different parameters can

further distinctions be made. Different sets of parameters will result in different types of definitions, which in turn will result in differences in how a ML is described or seen.

For a technical definition these parameters can be related to the apparatus, the transparent image, the projected image, the structure of the system, or something else. Regardless of what is used, certain types of projectors can be either included or excluded. For example: Is a lens used for image projection, or is there only a condenser lens? How many lenses are there? What type? And so on.

If the definition's primary focus is in a different direction, then other parameters, like the kind of transparent pictures used, the way to project them, image quality, etc., may be applied to define a ML.

For example, motion picture projectors use strips of transparent pictures; dissolving view projectors use two optical systems along with two pictures which closely resemble each other; phantasmagoria shows use rear projection; and so on.

3.3. A Definition's Purpose_

The number and type of parameters used are influenced by a definition's purpose. The purpose of a definition depends on the goal it wants to achieve, which depends on the person who compiles the definition. For example: Are you a member of the audience, or a showman? A film historian, or an engineer interested in optics and image reproduction?

Consequently, what a ML is depends on the parameters used to define it. The intention of the definition forms an important part of the definition. As a result, several different types of definition exist from which to choose from.

3.4. All About You_

Perhaps you like one definition more than another. Maybe you prefer your own definition. If that's the case, you are in good company. Maybe you even prefer to give the ML a different name, your name. If that's the case, you still are in good company.

This brings me back to the question I started out with, but instead of asking: What is a Magic Lantern? I will now correct that question and improve it to: Exactly what kind of projector are *you* talking about when *you* use the word Magic Lantern?

And the answer is: A Magic Lantern is what you want it to be!

4. Final Word_

If the purpose of this article was to give you a better understanding of what a ML is then at some point you must have realized it's complicated, perhaps even hopeless. Who can give us a clear picture, pardon me, clear answer, which will satisfy everyone?

Should you at any time have any doubts about what to say or think about the ML, here are three questions to help you in your time of need. They are: What do you want from the ML? What are your intentions? What is a ML to You?

5. Oh!_

What will I say next time should anyone ask me the eternal question: What's a ML?

The Magic Lantern stands, and remains, at the center of a revolutionary change, which permanently affected our lives, and transformed human civilization.

A magic lantern - see End note 6.

6. Are We Done?_

PS: What's an epidiascope? Anyone?

Ed: A diabolically heavy device formerly used in lecture theatres to project both slides and opaque material (pages of books, images etc) which are clamped underneath. Some are still around, mostly used as boat anchors, I understand.

End notes:

1. Front cover - a mahogany tri-unial magic lantern by Chatham Pexton of London, circa 1890, together with a Mickey Mouse lantern, see Note 3 below.

2. Phantasmagoria lantern by Cox of London, circa 1850.

3. A Mickey Mouse toy lantern made by W Butcher & Sons, London. Late 1930s. Height of lantern body is 5" to top of handle. Slide is 1 1/2" x 5 1/4". The lantern body can also be used as a flashlight with the bull's eye lens attached as at left of the picture.

4. Pair of dissolving view lanterns by Newton, London, on original storage chest/stand, with fan dissolving device operated by a rack and pinion from the back of the stand. Shown with original oil storage cans and filling funnel for the two 3-wick oil illuminants. Circa 1870.

5. Bausch & Lomb of Rochester, New York, Model W electric Balopticon lantern projector, circa 1920.

6. Jean Schoenner of Nurenberg, toy lantern with sheet steel lamp house, brass objective mount supported by a standing man in black lacquer finished 'white metal' casting. Circa 1880. This version has a vertically sliding slide holder arranged so that 6" diameter discs may be shown in addition to rectangular slides of 2" width. See back cover of this journal.

A Slide Binder Tool by Marshall Studios Inc.

In 1929 Marshall Studios was located at 3001 North New Jersey Street in Indianapolis. They made lampshades and turned wood lamp bases. In 1938 they started to produce equipment for the photographic industry. Nicholas Marshall made and produced commercially the first color slide viewer, the Marshall Studios Vuescope. Additionally, the Marshall Slide Binder was produced. Production of photographic material ceased in 1948 after a fire destroyed their dies and stock. The slide binder shown was therefore made between 1938 and 1948. It is far too small for regular American format slides, so it must have been for glass slides with cover glasses, measuring no more than 1 1/2" from center to corner. Perhaps Marshall's Vuescope slides were that size? It would fit 35mm slides, but they do not require binding! It is shown with a slide made for the Viopticon, which, having a cardboard mount, also does not require binding!

See article on page 16 for more about the Viopticon projector.

This binder from the Riley Collection.

Note: This article was inadvertently published without endnote references. For original text of this article with all endnote references see supplemental (11) pages added to the end of this Gazette

Rhodes Opera House Fire Revisited - in the year of the 125th Anniversary of the Tragedy

Ron Easterday with research assistance by Dorothy Easterday, April 2023

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Rhodes Opera House Fire
Memorials and Resources
Newspaper Accounts
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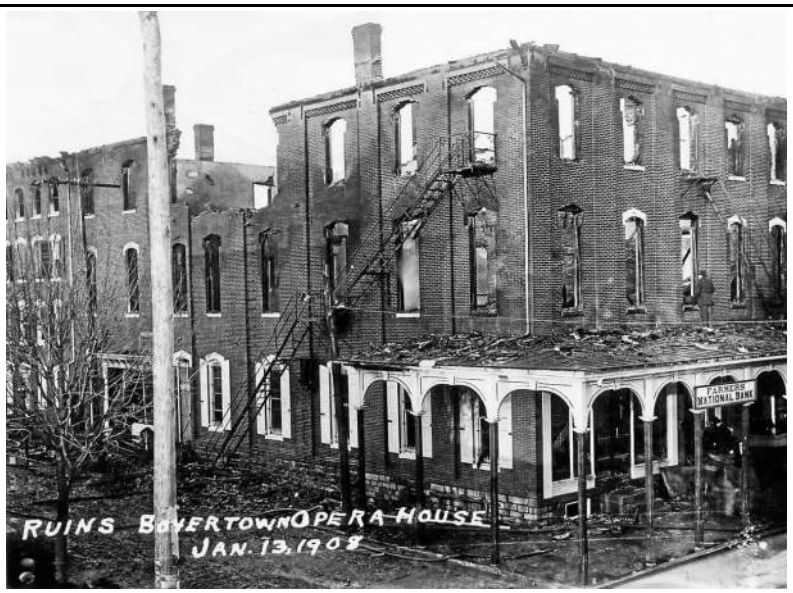


Introduction

2023 marks the 125th anniversary of the Rhodes Opera House tragedy in Boyertown, Pennsylvania. This event has been mentioned in prior ML Bulletins and Gazettes before , however given the span of time it seems fitting to remember those who lost their lives and those who survived the tragic event by not forgetting their history.

The access of digital materials and search options has made additional resources available to further understand the event. There are numerous, often conflicting, accounts of the event that can be easily found on the web; by transcribing some of the first-hand reports the reader can form their own opinion of the events.

The Traveling Pageants of Mrs. H. E. Monroe

The evening was a presentation of a traveling pageant, a mix of live performers and magic lantern slides that were produced by Mrs. H. E. Monroe. Mrs. Monroe was a lecturer and educator in addition to producing magic lantern pageants. Following her father Reverend David Earhart as a missionary to Kansas in 1860, she funded and opened a private school in Atchison Kansas in 1870 which grew to a college of over 200 students annually. She moved to Washington, DC in 1885 and began lecturing in 1888.

She traveled to Europe to obtain magic lantern slides, including from Levy of Paris "the best slide maker in the world" and to get ideas for costumes, visiting the Palais de Costume at the Paris Exposition in 1900 and having Scottish soldiers' suits made in Glasgow Scotland for $ 400.

From newspaper reports, her traveling shows were operated thus: Enlist the sponsorship of a local church, recruit church members and prominent local citizens as volunteers to portray acting roles, male/female choruses, and vocal soloists, rehearse them for a week or two under the tutelage of her assistant Miss S. Ethel Brown[7], then stage the production at a local Opera house over two days, while narrating the slides herself. *The English Reformation,* the story of Oliver Cromwell, ran 2-1/2 hours with "one hundred or more of the leading talent of the town" in costumes performing, Mrs. Monroe lecturing in four acts, with "75 superb stereopticon views" shown between the live portions of the pageant. Mrs. Monroe provided the costumes: elaborate and gorgeous, of silks, satins, and velvets, costing nearly $3,000[7]" lantern slides, lantern, lanternist, and herself, then split the gross revenue with the sponsoring church, typically 85% for Mrs. Monroe/15% for the church[12].

Harriet Earhart Monroe

Woman of the Century 1893.

Indeed, Mrs. Monroe's life story and traveling magic lantern pageants would be an interesting research project in its own right for someone to undertake. [2 3]

Rhodes Opera House Fire

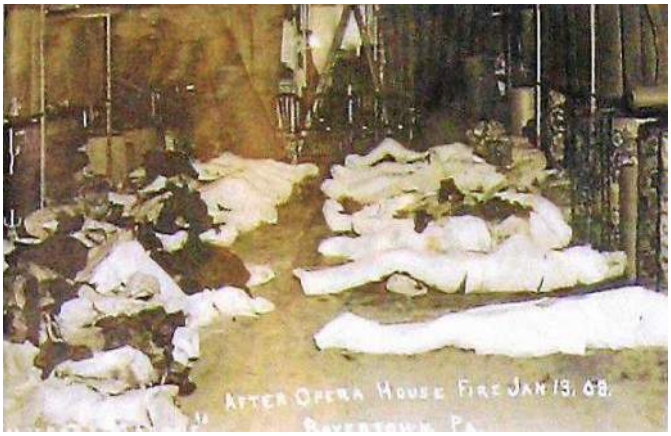
In one of the great theater/magic lantern show tragedies, it was at her production of *The Scottish Reformation* on January 13, 1908 at the Rhodes Opera House, Boyertown, Pennsylvania, that resulted in a devastating fire that killed 170 men, women and children, over 50% of the audience, and nearly 10 % of the town's entire population, 25 of which could not be identified and are buried in a mass grave at Fairview Cemetery in Boyertown[12]

The Rhodes Opera house was a three story, wood frame building. The first floor was shops; the second the auditorium, with two offices at the front; the third floor with a dressing room and lodge space.

While the initial cause of the fire was apparently the upsetting of a kerosene lamp on the stage, followed by upsetting a tank of kerosene that fed the footlights, not the magic lantern per se, it was said the loud hissing of the lantern gasses for the calcium lamp by an inexperienced lanternist started the initial panic, causing the accident on stage, which quickly engulfed the stage curtain Two reputable sources and statements made at the inquest suggest that the lanternist either did not reconnect the gas hose that became loose or failed to close a gas valve on the loose hose, allowing lighter-than-air hydrogen to accumulate at the ceiling as survivors described an explosion. Many of the bodies were burned from the head down as a result. As bad as the kerosene fire on the stage and curtain were, this likely flashover event sealed the fate of many.

The reports transcribed below describe the problems with the exit stairs, and while there were two fire escapes, they were at unmarked windows, at just two of eight windows so you would have to guess the locations, with sills three and one-half feet above the floor, and blocked by extra chairs brought in for the event. At the inquest it was stated the law required fire escape landings within two inches of the window sill on the exterior, but said nothing about how high the sill could be above the inside floor. The stage curtain was of plain, untreated muslin. "Reference is also made to the plaster ceiling of the hall which had fallen down and was replaced with boards which were varnished." Nearly everything was against the cast and audience surviving.

As a result, this event and other notable theater tragedies led to what we take for granted in places of assembly today due to our building codes: Exit doors that swing out, not in; multiple exits sized for the full occupant capacity; exit devices, i.e. "panic bars" on doors; lighted exit signs, fire resistant projection booths, and fire-retardant curtains/furnishings. This production was the first and last of the lanternist, and the last of Ms. Monroe's 25 year career as a pageant producer.



Bodies laid out in the temporary morgue.

Memorials and Resources

While there have been memorials over the years, The Boyertown Historical Society has hosted an annual memorial of the victims since 2013. For photos and an account of the 115th anniversary of the tragedy, see the *Reading Eagle*, January 16, 2023.

Photos of the building before and after the fire, and as it stands today, may be viewed on-line. [11]

This posting contains some a description of the events at odds with other reports, but is a good overall accounting of the events.

Another extensive, detailed writeup, with links to other publications, is an interesting read and presented by a member of the fire service, so adds that knowledge and perspective. It includes details I have not found elsewhere, more photos, and even a vintage hand sketch of the auditorium floor plan. It varies in places from other descriptions of the events. But as is noted, and makes sense, that at the inquest none of the survivor's stories matched; there was simply so much confusion and panic that events were remembered differently, rendering it impossible to give a single, definitive account of the event. So I offer the following extracts from articles published soon after the fire from which you can draw your own conclusions.

Newspaper Accounts - The Start of the Fire

The tragedy caught the entire nation's attention, with reports on the front page of *The New York Times*. First it was reported "a moving picture film caught fire" and first hand report of "The machine was apparently operating smoothly. Then, without warning, there was a terrible explosion. It seemed to shake the building," but this proved to be in error.

The Reverend Adam M. Weber, pastor St. John's Lutheran Church, under whose auspices the play was given, was sitting in the front row and gave this first-hand account "Suddenly there came a hiss from the rear of the house, where the stereopticon lantern was placed. Immediately all the people around arose to see what was the matter. The curtain was then lowered, and when the people on the stage heard the noises they raised it. Just then a wave of the crowd broke upon the stage and, together with the raising of the curtain, upset the tank of oil [kerosene] which fed the eight burners used for footlights. Two of the burners immediately began for blaze up. I threw one of the little girls with me upon the stage and then followed her myself. Raising a cap, I started to beat out the flames, which were shooting from the two burners. Some one [sic] threw down a piece of carpet and tried to assist in extinguishing the fire. When the blaze got beyond control four men and myself tried to lift the oil tank, and throw it out the window. The heat of the fire, however, had melted the soldering, and the whole blazed up in a burst of flame that shot up to the ceiling. There was no chance of saving the building now."

Mr. Schmoyer, whose wife died in the fire testified "The young man giving the performance put in the wrong picture. The women told him so. He changed the picture. Then there was a hissing sound. Next the piano lamp fell to the floor. I picked up a piece of carpet and assisted in the work of extinguishing the fire caused by the overturned footlights" echoing similar testimony "Someone pulled up the curtain and just then the lamp standing upon the piano toppled to the floor. Then the tank of the footlights fell over and spread oil that caught fire. Then I heard an explosion" and "I … ran to a window, opened it with the intention of throwing out the burning footlight tank. This occupied perhaps two minutes. When I grasped the tank there was a sudden flash, intense heat, and tremendous flame.

Newspaper Accounts - The Fight to Escape

The auditorium had one main entry stair with in-swinging doors at the top and no landing. A second stair led from rear of the space, but was not visible to the audience or known to many except the actors on stage, and almost immediately the curtain caught fire which prevented anyone from the audience from accessing the second stair even if they had known of it. Unfortunately, this rear stair was open to the third floor and acted like a chimney, sealing the fate of those in the third floor dressing room. Reports vary with the main stair reported as between six feet[12] and six and one-half feet wide[26] but at the bottom the box office narrowed the exit to just three feet wide. The rear stair was reported as between just two feet and two-feet eight inches wide.

Early reports were that the entry stair doors were bolted shut "several of those who escaped from the auditorium say that the doorkeeper became so interested in the tableau that he bolted the doors, to prevent entrance of a crowd of Italians who had assembled about the entrance, and took a rear seat, where he could enjoy the show." It was at the head of the flight of stairs guarded by the swinging exit doors that the loss of life was greatest." A big German who encountered the locked entrance door pounded against it with his fists. Others fumbled for the bolt. The door stood firm. The German pinned his shoulder against the door but it did not give. It was only when the crowd had pressed those next to the door forward with tremendous force that the door gave way and the foremost were thrown down the steep steps." The momentum of the crowd carried others over the brink, and threw them on top of the scrambling heap at the bottom. At least a score were trampled to death in the struggled to regain their footing at the bottom of the steps. The mass of bodies obstructed the stair and prevented those in the rear from getting out. [23] Other reports at the inquest describe only the "left hand door bolted" of the two inswing doors being locked, but regardless, the damage was done.

There were two fire escape at windows from the second floor and one from the third. "Several years ago…a State Inspector visited the Opera House and looked it over. He ordered that fire-escapes be erected on both sides of the building. This was done and the Inspector then said that the building was satisfactory[23]".

This was echoed by a statement by Dr. Thomas A. Rhodes, the owner of the building, "that it had been inspected and passed by a state factory inspector after he had given a contract for fire escapes to a Reading man" and "that the factory inspectors told him from

whom he should buy his fire escapes, that he placed the order with the Reading contractor, and that the inspector passed the building."

The middle section of chairs were screwed to the floor, but loose chairs were brought in for extra seating. In the panic, "Men used the chair which had entangled their feet as weapons with which to clear a way to the open. Several woman say that they saw men respected in the community raise the chairs high over their heads and bring them down with crushing force on the heads of women and children." [23] This may well have been true, for "The ratio of [the dead] women and girls to men and boys is about nine to one," with 130 of the 170 dead women and children.

Newspaper Accounts - The Blame

Five parties were blamed at various points for the tragedy: Harry W. Fisher, the stereopticon operator; Dr. Thomas A. Rhodes, the owner of the building; Mr. H. E. Mauger, the lessee of the building; Mrs. H. E. Monroe, the producer of the pageant; and Deputy Factory inspector Harry Bechtel. A two-day inquest was held starting on January 29, 1908 with the coroner's jury holding two of the five responsible:

A rescue taking place.

"We find the primary causes thereof to have been the employment by Mrs. Harriet E. Monroe, of an inexperienced and incompetent operator of the calcium light, in the person of Henry Fisher, and the laxity of the Deputy Factory Inspector of the district, and the Department of Factory Inspection of the State of Penn's [sic] in its failure to enforce proper and adequate fire escapes and fire appliances, as well as its failure to enforce existing laws insuring public safety. We request the prosecuting attorney of Berks county to arrest and, if possible, convict, Mrs. Harriet E. Monroe and Harry McC Bechtel, the Deputy Factory Inspector of this district, on the charge of criminal negligence."

The gutted interior.

But District Attorney Schaeffer never prosecuted anyone, "because the laws are too defective to sustain any charges." Another article reported the odd statement "The apparent attempt to make scapegoats of outsiders is not approved by the district attorney." In the end, no one was held responsible or provided any restitution to the families of the victims. Let us examine the five possible responsible parties.

The Lanternist, or the Stereopticon Operator

Later reports stated that the gas tanks of the stereopticon machine exploded, but the operator, Henry W. Fisher was quoted "I must have turned the wrong valve. There was a long drawn out hissing sound that frightened the women and children. Several of them jumped up and screamed and ran toward the stage. The curtain was down. I don't know what happened next. I was caught in a mop of crazy people. I was knocked down and trampled on. I struggled along. I was badly burned. I feel that I am responsible for this tragic affair." [27]

But this story changed, with the next day Fisher being quoted "As God as my witness, I am not to blame for this terrible thing. I did not cause the deaths of those poor people and if they want to arrest me I can be found at my home at any time. But I am innocent. I did not turn the wrong valve of the gas tube as has been reported. There was no explosion of any tank either before or after the panic. The tanks themselves are still intact. There is not a rent or a hole in either of them. Just as Mrs. Mayers was finishing her lectures, for which I was throwing views on the screen, a valve on

the tube leading from the oxygen tank become loose. There was a puffing sound and then a hiss. I [seized?] my monkey wrench and in an instantly tightened the valve. The noises immediately stopped. I was then amazed to see people climbing upon the stage. I shouted at the audience: 'There is no danger, there is no danger'."

Reports followed that Fisher "had had only two days instruction in handling the calcium light, and that he operated the machine in public for the first time on that fatal night." [28]

Testifying at the inquest, Fred. S. Murray, president of the New York Calcium Light Company, the company that sold the gas for the event, said that a calcium light operator needed three months training. [12]

But countering this, C.T. Mulligan of Philadelphia testified "Fisher was brought here by Mrs. Della Mayers, the woman who was conducting the entertainment, and she asked that we instruct Fisher to run the stereopticon. He came in on the two following days, and he must have worked for more than two hours a day. It is a very simple thing to operate one of these machines and when Fisher went away we were sure he mastered the workings." "It is not unusual for us to send men out of here to operate stereopticon machines with 15 minutes of practice" [26]

Dr. Thomas A. Rhodes, Building Owner

There were allegations against Dr. Rhodes that the building was unsafe, but apparently his testimony at the inquest prevailed as he stated the required fire escapes were installed. He was considered partly responsible for allowing the use of kerosene footlamps, but the inquest jury did not indict him.

Following the lack of action by District Attorney Schaeffer, two husbands of wives that died in the fire, Addison Schmoyer and Frank Cullen, filed suit against Rhodes for violating the State Fire Escape Laws. Rhodes was due to be tried in September of 1908, with it reported in September 21, 1908 that a Grand Jury found "a true bill against Dr. Thomas J. B. Rhodes. Mrs. Harriet E. Monroe already indicted. Cases likely be tried at the next term of court."

The saga continued with attorneys for Dr. Rhodes arguing the charges be dropped on technical grounds, "not an indictable offence" in April of 1909. Finally, on May 5, 1910 Rhodes was found not guilty when witnesses "declared no explosion would have occurred had the operator of the calcium light machine stuck to his post after the fire broke out, or even turned off the tubes properly. This ends all other suites against Dr. Rhodes." This verdict might suggest attention be returned to Henry Fisher, but no evidence has been found that he was accused at this late date, over two years after the fire.

Mr. H. E. Mauger, the lessee of the building

Mr. Mauger was also considered partly responsible for allowing the use of kerosene footlamps, but the inquest jury did not indict him. The claim was made that the building should have been equipped with gas lighting, not kerosene, with Mr. East, Secretary of the gas company testifying "The gas pipe was laid into the building. That is, the pipe was there but was not connected up. The gas was turned on May 20, 1907," [24] a full eight months before the fire. But nothing came of this argument.

Mrs. H. E. Monroe, the producer of the pageant

Mrs. Monroe, producer of the traveling religious pageants, was not at the performance. She typically narrated the portions of the pageant with the slides, but being 70 years old and having troubles with her voice, she had her younger sister Della Mayers lecture that evening. Della died in the fire. The production was also without one of Mrs. Monroe's regular lanternists, resulting in the services of the inexperienced Harry W. Fisher, causing her indictment. The tragedy devastated her and she never produced another pageant. At the inquest it was reported that Della Mayers wrote to Mrs. Monroe's regular lanternist that she was concerned Fisher was "incompetent" asking for him to perform instead, to which he declined. A damming letter from Mrs. Monroe came out where she instructed her regular lanternist to say, if anyone asked, that Fisher had eight years' experience, clearly a false statement. [12]

Later in September of 1908, a warrant to arrest Mrs. Harriet E. Monroe was issued by Reading Magistrate Bruce, sworn out by former County Commissioner Frank Moyer, of Boyertown whose 17-year-old daughter was one of the victims, charging her with criminal negligence "for the employment of incompetent help at the moving picture lamp". "The case goes before the Grand Jury next Wednesday" There has been no record found that Mrs. Monroe was indicted or tried in connection with this warrant.

Deputy Factory inspector Harry Bechtel

Harry Bechtel was found responsible for his "failures" including allowing the use of kerosene footlights, and

for not requiring the sills at the fire escapes to be lowered and marked on the inside, although these were not State requirements at the time. Mr. Bechtel was chastised at the inquisition that he did not make regular inspections of the theater, indeed admitting he had only returned to see that the fire escapes were installed from the exterior "My duty ended with the erection of the fire escapes…". Clearly flustered at all the acquisitions, Bechtel exclaimed "I have more important places to go than a measly little place like Boyertown." [12] Obviously this did nothing to gain him sympathy, with Mr. Young, attorney for the coroner, saying in his closing remarks: "Maybe this Penn'a [sic] German borough … is located along a 'Jerkwater' railroad, but it is within eight miles of the home of the Deputy Factory Inspector, and there is no reason why the citizens of Boyertown should not be protected to the fullest extent of the State Factory Inspectors Department. We may be Penn'a [sic] Germans, but we are honest, stoic, and fair, and we will not sacrifice the lives of our people if we can help it." [26]

Endnotes

MLB, Vol 2, No 4, January 1981, page 8, *Here and There, the Editor's Scrapbook*, short writeup by editor LWW; MLG Vol 11, No 3, Fall 1999, pages 16-17, article based on

The scene outside the theater after the fire.

Reading Eagle newspaper account; *MLG* Vol 27 No 2-3, Page 26, Summer/Fall 2015,page 26, Table of illustrated lecturers, Mrs. Delia Mayers; *ePub* June 2017, page 6, response to a question, refers to Wikipedia article.

Women's Who's Who of America 1914-1915, The American Commonwealth Company, 1914, page 571.

A Woman of the Century Fourteen Hundred Biographical Sketches Accompanied by Portraits of Leading American Women in All Walks of Life, Charles Wells Moulton, 1893, page 512.

The Cameron County Press [Emporium , PA], Volume 40, No 2, March 2, 1905, Page 1.

The Cameron County Press [Emporium , PA], Volume 38, No 29, September 10, 1903, Pages 1 and 5.

The Cameron County Press [Emporium , PA], Volume 38, No 27, August 27, 1903, Page 4.

The Cameron County Press [Emporium , PA], Volume 38, No 28, September 3, 1903, Page 1.

The Methodist Review, Volume XCVII – Fifth Series, Volume XXXI, William V. Kelley, L.H.D. editor, The Methodist Book Concern, pages 169-172, a 3-1/2 page book review of *Twice-Born Men in America* by Harriet Earhart Monroe, Lutheran Publication Society, Philadelphia.

For other writings by Mrs. Monroe, see *The Pageant of Protestantism Celebrating the Quadricentennial of the Reformation*, the Lutheran Publication Society, 1917; *History of the Life of Gustavus Adolphus II The Hero-General of the Reformation*, The Lutheran Publication Society, 1910; *Washington its Sights and Insights*, Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909; *Past 30*, 1878, *The Art of Conversation, 1889*; *Historical Lutheranism*, and *Heroine of the Mining Camp*.

Author's photo, Fairview Cemetery, Boyertown, PA, August 2, 2011, "The Unidentified".

Photos of the building before and after the fire, and as it stands today, may be viewed at

https://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/literary-cultural-heritage-map-pa/feature-articles/trapped-third-act-rhoads-opera-house-fire. This posting contains some conflicting information in the text regarding what happened, but is still provides a detailed account worth reading.

Midwinter Mourning The Boyertown Opera House Fire, Mary Jane Schneider, MJS Publications, Volume I, 1991, and *A Town in Tragedy The Boyertown Opera House Fire*, Volume II, 1992.

Despite Fisher's claim the oxygen hose/valve was loose, oxygen likely would have safely dispersed, unlike hydrogen which rose to the ceiling. In the dark, with just two days training, it is easy to understand Fisher might not have known which hose was loose.

The building built in 1884, originally had two iron ladders at the windows. The fire escapes were added in 1904. *The Reading Eagle* [Reading, PA], May 3, 1908, page 6.

It was reported at the inquest by the State Factory Inspector that "The fire escape people furnish the signs", but apparently none were installed and "That there is no law to compel people to post exit notices.". *The Reading Eagle* [Reading, PA], January 30, 1908 page 8.

The Reading Eagle [Reading, PA], July 14, 1908, page 1.

To name just two other tragedies, reference the Richmond Theatre Fire of 1811 with 72 deaths, primarily due to combustible curtains and wall hangings and The Iroquois Theater Fire, Chicago, 1903, started with combustible curtains and led to 602 deaths due to inadequate exits and lack of a sprinkler system. This tragedy inspired a hardware salesman, Carl Prinzler, who had tickets for the Iroquois that evening but missed attending that fatal night, combined with architect Henry DuPont and the Clemens Vonnegut hardware company, to patent the first practical panic device for exit doors in 1908 under the trade name Von Duprin, which continues as a major manufacturer of exit devices today.

All building codes in the United States are modeled after the *International Building Code*, reference Chapter 6 *Interior Finishes* and Chapter 10 *Means of Egress* for typical requirements, see International Code Council, https://codes.iccsafe.org/content/IBC2018P5.

The Story Behind Von Duprin, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNIJ1ToOHtg and *How it All Began* https://idighardware.com/2009/05/how-it-all-began/ for an article written by Carl Prinzle in the 1930's.

https://www.readingeagle.com/2023/01/16/victims-of-1908-boyertown-opera-house-fire-remembered-3/.

https://disasteroushistory.blogspot.com/2019/08/. This includes photos after the fire and a sketched floor plan of the theater.

The New York Times [New York, NY], January 14, 1908, pages 1-2.

The New York Times [New York, NY], January 15, 1908, pages 1-2.

The Reading Eagle [Reading, PA], May 3, 1908, page 6.

The Reading Eagle [Reading, PA], May 2, 1908, page 1 and July 14, 1908, page 1.

The Reading Eagle [Reading, PA], January 30, 1908, page 8.

New York Tribune [New York, NY], January 29, 1908, page 4.

The Afro-American Ledger [Baltimore, MD], January 18, 1908, page 2.

The Daily Star [Fredricksburg, VA], January 18, 1908, page number illegible.

The Reading Eagle [Reading, PA], January 30, 1908, page 1.

Montour American [Danville, PA], February 7 and March 5, 1908, page 1.

The Sun [New York, NY], January 16, 1908, page 2, and *The New York Times*, January 16, 1908, page 7.

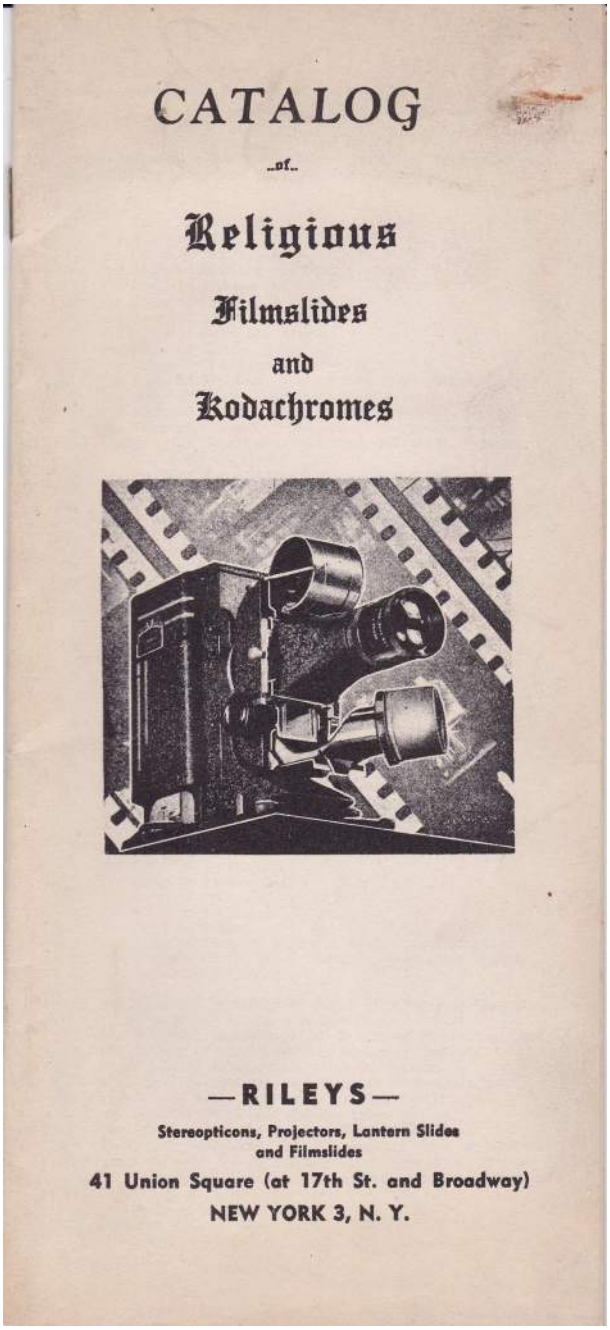
The Reading Eagle [Reading, PA], May 2, 1908, page 1 and July 14, 1908, page 1; *The Easton Free Press* [Easton, PA], June 20, 1908, page 1.

The Daily Star [Fredricksburg, VA], September 21, 1908, page number illegible.

The Reading Eagle [Reading, PA], March 12, 1909, page 6.

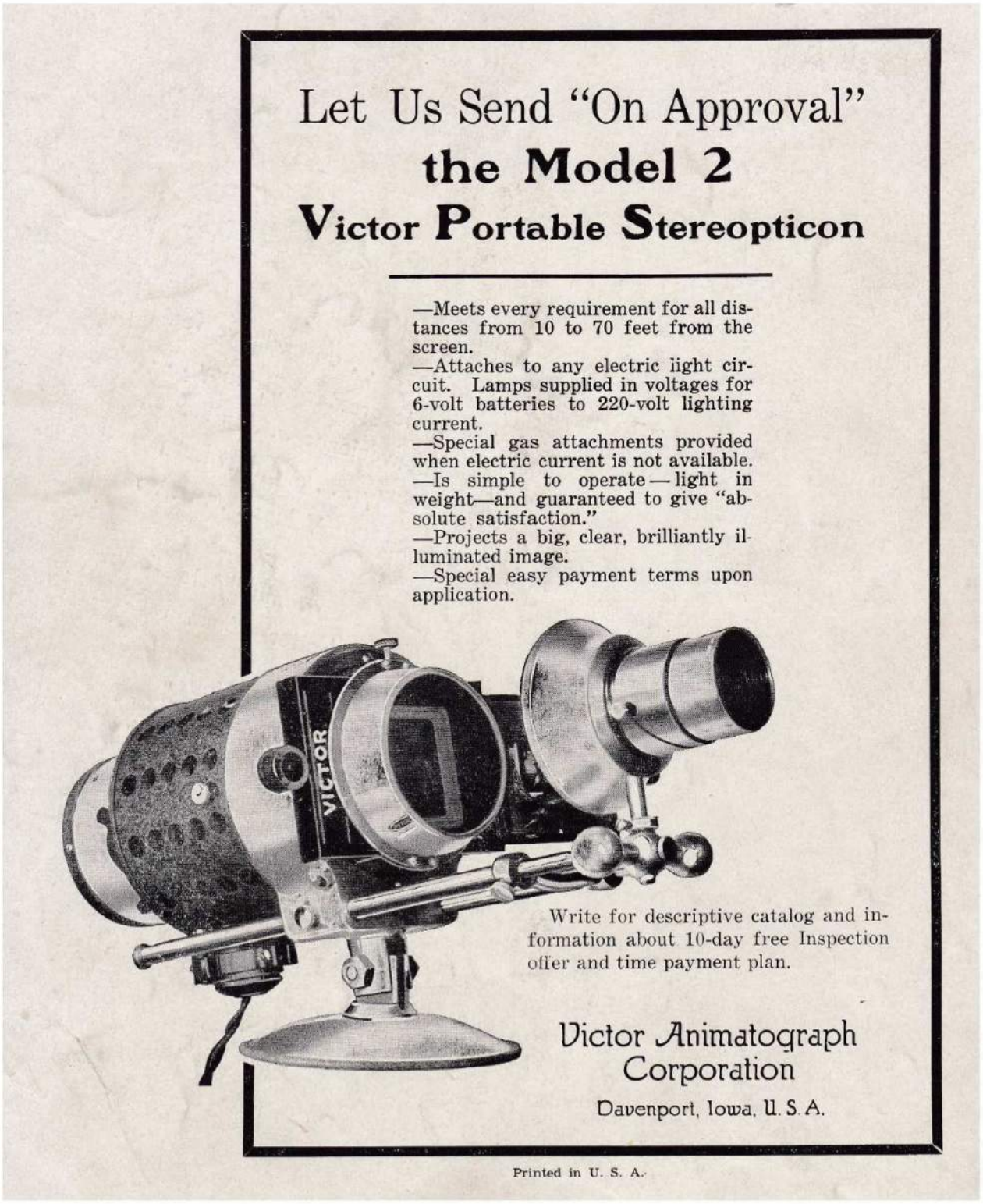
The Trenton True American [Trenton, NJ], May 6, 1910, page 2.

The Philadelphia Record [Philadelphia, PA], September 12, 1908, page 6.



Alexander F Victor - Founder of the Victor Animatograph Company

David Evans looks at a couple of lanterns


Let Us Send "On Approval"
the Model 2
Victor Portable Stereopticon
—Meets every requirement for all distances from 10 to 70 feet from the screen.
—Attaches to any electric light circuit. Lamps supplied in voltages for 6-volt batteries to 220-volt lighting current.
—Special gas attachments provided when electric current is not available.
—Is simple to operate—light in weight—and guaranteed to give "absolute satisfaction."
—Projects a big, clear, brilliantly illuminated image.
—Special easy payment terms upon application.
VICTOR
Write for descriptive catalog and information about 10-day free Inspection offer and time payment plan.
Victor Animatograph Corporation
Davenport, Iowa, U. S. A.
Printed in U. S. A.

Victor was a Swedish-American magician, inventor and manufacturer born in Bollnas, Sweden on 20 June 1878; his father was a Swedish Army officer. He studied for a period under the physicist Solemon Andrée, who quickened his interest in physics and mechanics. Victor was sixteen in 1894 when he attended a performance by Stephanio, a renowned magician. He joined Stephanio's act, learned sleight-of-hand and added several illusions while on tour with him in Europe. While Stephanio was performing in Paris in 1896, Victor saw a Lumière Cinématographe presentation. He later claimed that, after much persuasion, Lumières Frères sold him a Cinématographe, 'Number 17', and some 15 metre films, and moving pictures were added to Stephanio's magic show. Late in 1896 Stephanio died in Cairo. Victor (so the story goes) successfully carried on the show, as 'The Boy Wonder of Magic and Illusion' - and later as 'Alexander the Great' - through the Near East and India until 1900, when he traveled to the USA. In the summer of 1897 Victor rented a vacant shop store in Newark, New Jersey, and showed films on an Edison Projecting Kinetoscope plus live music from Bowman's Military Band.

Until 1908, he operated two melodrama companies, and when these folded he worked at the Edison Laboratories at East Orange, New Jersey, and also developed a motorised washing machine for the White Lily Washing Machine Company of Davenport, Iowa. He developed various ideas for amateur motion-picture equipment using images on discs, and in 1910 obtained funding from the directors of the White Lily Company to form the New Victor Animato-Graph Co. (later Victor Animatograph Co.), originally at Rockingham Road, then at 216-18 East Third Street and from 1914 at 312-14 East Second Street, all in Davenport, Iowa.

Victor Animatograph 'Viopticon' lantern

Special wood push-through slide carrier for the Viopticon

Victor designed a carbon arc lamp suitable for portable projectors and stereopticons. The Victor Portable No. 2 lantern for regular American slides used the lamp, as did the Viopticon, introduced in 1912.

The reverse end of the Viopticon, showing the ceramic insulators and holders for the carbon rods and the brass connectors below.

The Portable No. 2 Animatograph Stereopticon lantern for regular slides.

Victor Animatograph Stereopticon Portable No. 2 set up for really long distance projection
(From the H P Riley Collection)

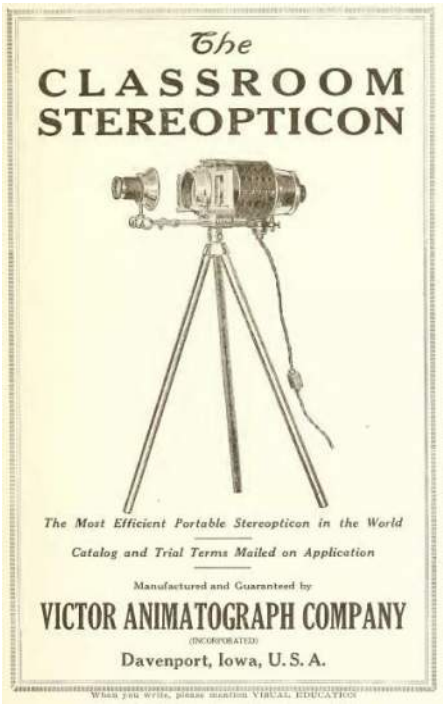
The Viopticon used single glass slides measuring 2 5/8" x 2¼" mounted in embossed pressboard frames. No cover glass was used, the emulsion side being coated with a very hard collodion base coating which resisted scratches. Similar slides, but the image size measuring 1 5/8" x 1 ½", and mounted in cardboard frames were produced by the Stereopticon Slide Co of Loma Linda, California, for the same projector.

Victor Animatograph also produced regular American size slides in a similar format, which are known as "Featherweight" slides and proved to be very durable. The Viopticon and the Portable No. 2 were extensively advertised through the 1910s and 1920s in religious magazines, with slide sets to rent or buy. While these slides were not part of a spectacular Magic Lantern theater experience, they represent an early example of educational technology as manufacturers began to promote the use of projectors in the classroom.

From 1911 and over the next few years the firm produced and marketed several novel motion picture and slide projectors. In 1917 Victor designed and built the portable Victor Safety Cinema, using a variation of the French Pathé 28 mm safety film, urging the Society of Motion Picture Engineers to adopt this as a new standard for projection in Schools and churches, but its success was limited. In 1923 Kodak announced the 16 mm film standard, and Victor immediately designed and marketed a camera and projector, helping create the mass market for educational, industrial and religious film-users. Victor 16 mm equipment was highly successful into the sound-film era and post-war years. His final projects were a new 8 mm camera and a 'Multicolor Televisor'.

By November 1921 Victor had become the largest slide manufacturer in the United States. The firm employed women to hand tint the slides and in 1924 was paying them between 2 and 5 cents for each slide, depending on the quality required.

Alexander Victor died in 1961.

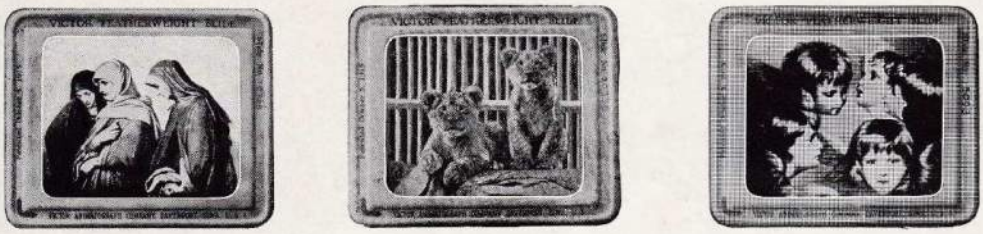


Victor "Featherweight" Slides

Standard American Size

To Fit All Standard Stereopticons

Stock Slides - Made-to-Order Slides - Rental Sets



(Patented)
Exact Size, 3¼x4 Inches

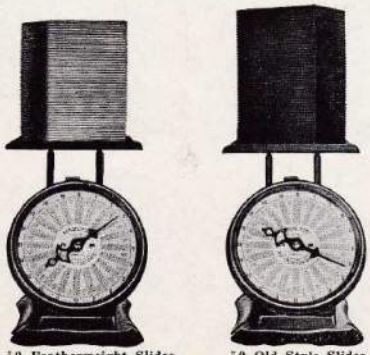
Old Style Slides With Cover Glass and Taped Edges Will Be Furnished if Requested

SINCE the beginning of stereopticons, lantern slides have remained the same — heavy, fragile, bulky, expensive.

The latest Victor innovation is the Standard Featherweight Slide—the first real improvement in photographic lantern slide transparencies.

The photographic image is on glass, retaining the clearness and general quality that is possible only with a glass slide. In the old form, the glass is full size of the slide, and a cover glass protects the photographic surface. The waste of glass under the mask and binding has been eliminated, and in the Victor Slide, the actual glass area is only a little larger than the aperture or opening. This glass transparency is mounted in an embossed press-board frame. The emulsion is coated with a preparation of crystal clearness and the hardness of flint, which gives protection against scratches, and allows for thorough cleaning.

Compared to the old form, the "Featherweight" Slide weighs less than one-half, costs less, eliminates breakage in use or in shipping, is easier to handle—more compact.



50 Featherweight Slides
2¾ Pounds

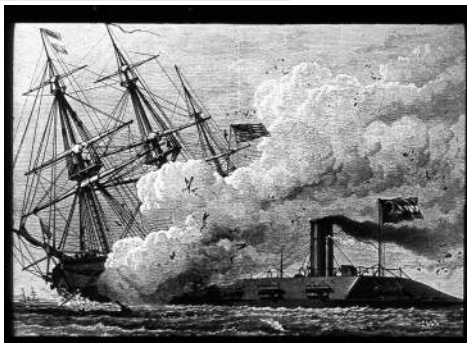
50 Old Style Slides
6¼ Pounds

There are more than twenty million Victor Lantern Slides in use.

The completeness of Victor Lantern Slide Service has met with universal approval among thousands of stereopticon users in all parts of the world.

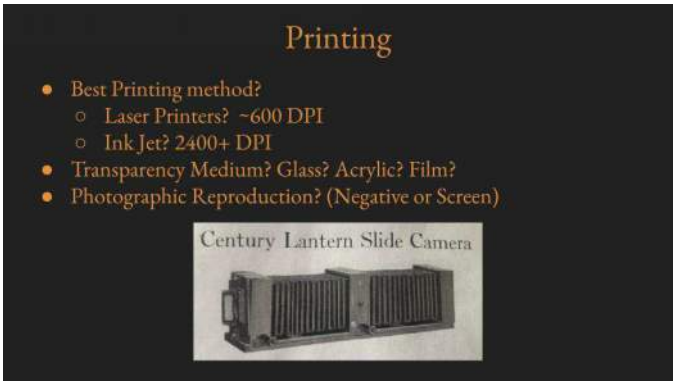
Sample Featherweight Slide Sent on Request

'Victor Animatograph Company, Davenport, Iowa', lightly stamped into the pressboard surround, barely visible in the left picture, and the image, right.



I was asked to perform a Halloween Magic Lantern show in Los Angeles. and wanted to include Joseph Boggs Beale's slides of The Raven. Yet, I didn't have the slides and finding them was sure to be impossible. Yet, if I could get scans of the originals, I could at least try to reproduce them. As the public would be paying to see this show, I wanted it to have top rate content.

Fortunately, Ron Easterday of the MLS had the slides and was willing to scan them for me. The 300DPI scans he sent me were absolutely gorgeous. Though I was unclear if 300 DPI was good enough for project, it was what I had so I was determined to work with it.



I next had to decide which reproduction method I was going to use. The way I see it, I had a few different choices.

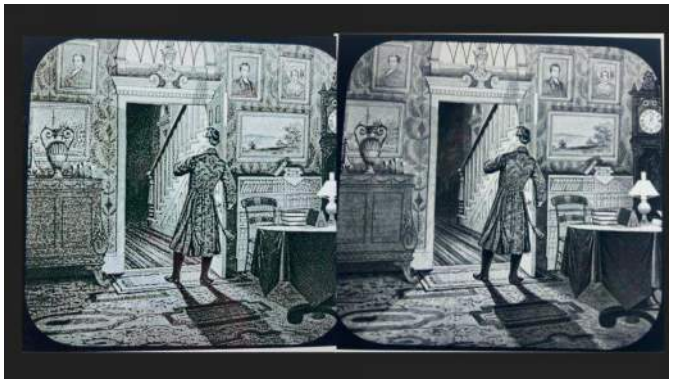
1. Print out the images on transparency film using either a laser or inkjet printer
2. Print out a negative and use that to produce a photographic image with either modern B&W film or using wet plate collodion.
3. Point my Graflex 4x5 camera at the screen and take a shot of the image onto film.

All three approaches seemed worth trying and I was curious about how the results would compare.

Though, the first option seemed like the most direct and, if it worked well, would be the easiest.

Printing
Epson ET-8500 Inkjet Photo Printer ($650)
5760x1440 DPI
Both Pigment and Dye Ink for Black
Pictorico Inkjet Transparency Film ($1.50 Per Sheet)
PICTORICO

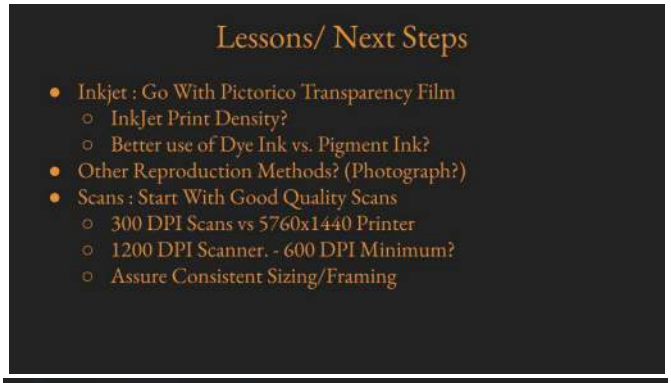
I went to a local copy shop and had transparencies printed on their 600DPI laser printer. The results were less than satisfactory. The image had a digital, muddled appearance. Since the high end laser printer was not satisfactory, I decided to go with an InkJet instead. I took the plunge and purchased an Epson ET-8500. The results were much, much better. The Epson printer can print 5760x1440 resolution and even with the 300 DPI source image, the printed images looked great!



I also had to try a few different transparency films. The image on the left is the transparency film available at the office supply store. It was far less than satisfactory. Instead I found I needed to use Pictorico film to get good results. I also found some of the transparency films listed for InkJet printing of transparencies for Screen Printing worked pretty good.

The next trick was going to be how to mount them. I use wood slides for all my shows so I wasn't worried about putting them in glass. We have a laser engraver so we cut out wood frames and installed plexiglass windows to hold the transparencies. The slides are held together with wood screws which are inset so they don't scratch the lantern.

Although not an exact replica, the slides performed reasonably well. I had a few issues with density. The inks in the inkjet printer are not as dense as the original photographic medium used to copy the slides. This means they look brighter on screen. I also had some sizing/clipping issues that I had to fix in my process. These three images show the difference with the original projected on the left and the reproduction on the right.


Lessons/ Next Steps
Inkjet : Go With Pictorico Transparency Film
InkJet Print Density?
Better use of Dye Ink vs. Pigment Ink?
Other Reproduction Methods? (Photograph?)
Scans : Start With Good Quality Scans
300 DPI Scans vs 5760x1440 Printer
1200 DPI Scanner. - 600 DPI Minimum?
Assure Consistent Sizing/Framing

Overall, I think printing with an Inkjet printer is a good way to go. The images were certainly usable and only folks familiar with the originals noticed the difference. I do want to continue to improve them though. For the issues with density, I've been experimenting with stacking multiple prints of the same image to build up the density. This actually works quite nicely. I also want to try reproducing images at a higher resolution instead of the 300 DPI images I started with. As I have a usable starting place, this can only get better.

Cellophane Slides?

Amongst the many envelopes, boxes, folders etc in the Riley Collection is a regular letter-size envelope containing a couple of dozen images printed on Cellophane. Presumably they were intended to be mounted between two pieces of plain glass, with a suitable mask, and bound with the usual black tape to make a relatively inexpensive slide production system. The images are quite high quality from the definition point of view, but extremely fragile. Many of the images had stuck together and had to be separated with great care.

They all seem to be of religious content, which is hardly surprising, as that is what Riley's specialised in.

Samuel Pepys – Diarist

Lesley Evans investigates a 17th Century Phenomonen

We all have things we hope to do before we die – and one of ours was, having acquired a handsome set of books on the subject, to actually read the Diary of Samuel Pepys.

Pepys was born in London in 1633. He is famous for a diary recording everyday events that were happening when he worked for the British Navy – he became Secretary to the Admiralty. He was also a member of the Royal Society, which at the time was devoted to scientific research, including optical devices

A decade (1660 – 1669) of recording trivialities mixed with important events and battles.

The Great Plague of London in 1665, written up by somebody who actually lived through it, is followed by a graphic and terrifying account of the Great Fire of London and the effects it had on the population who endured it. In between these two momentous events in English history, we were somewhat delighted to read:

August 19th 1666

"But by and by comes by agreement Mr Reeves[1] and after him Mr Spong[2]; and all day with them, both before and after dinner till 10 a-clock at night, upon Opticke enquiries – he bringing me a frame with closes on, to see how the Rays of light do cut one another, and in a dark room with smoake, which is very pretty. He did also bring a lantern, with pictures in glass to make strange things appear on a wall, very pretty."

August 22nd 1666

Pepys purchased a new glass (a 12 ft telescope) from Reeves "and so to look upon the stars and do like my glass very well and did even with him for it (i.e paid him) and a little perspective (binoculars, or possibly a spy glass) and the Lanthorne that shows tricks – all together costing me £9 - 5 shillings!"

The magic lantern was essentially a Dutch invention, and, quoting from Willem Wagenaar and Annet Duller[3] "It remains of interest that the earliest Dutch slides are mostly funny and entertaining. Even in the highest circles the magic lantern in this earliest period was above all a source of amusement."

Illustrations of the type of lantern that Pepys probably owned may be seen in Wagenaar and Duller[4] and other works on the history of the magic lantern, and also of course on the Internet. Probably the earliest known physically existing Dutch lantern is that in the Scientific Collection of the Dutch Reformed College of Sárospatak, Hungary, together with period slides, illustrated by Wagenaar & Duller. It dates from 1708.

1. Richard Reeves (or Reeve) (fl. 1640 – 1680) was a scientific instrument maker in London, renowned for his lens grinding accuracy. He worked with Christopher Wren (the architect) and Robert Hooke (the famous scientist and inventor). Reeve's telescopes and microscopes had a wide reputation for accuracy. Hooke worked with him in a technical advisory capacity. As Richard Reeve of Longacre, his firm was the foremost fashioner of optical instruments between 1641 and 1679, and "perspective-glass maker to the King" (Charles 2nd).

Reeve was also optician to James Gregory (inventor of the Gregorian reflecting telescope, first built in 1673 by Robert Hooke). Samuel Pepys called him "the best he knows in England, and he makes the best in the world."

Reeve's son was also a scientific instrument maker known as Richard Reeve Jr (fl 1680), however the man referred to by Pepys as "Young Reeves" (23rd March 1659/60) would have been the older Richard's son John, who took over the family business in 1679 and ran it until about 1710.

Richard Senior was arrested in 1664 for murdering his wife, but secured a royal pardon from Charles 2nd, probably at a great cost, and probably with the assistance of Pepys.

2. Mr Spong was also a scientific and mathematical instrument maker, but there is sadly no detail recorded about him.

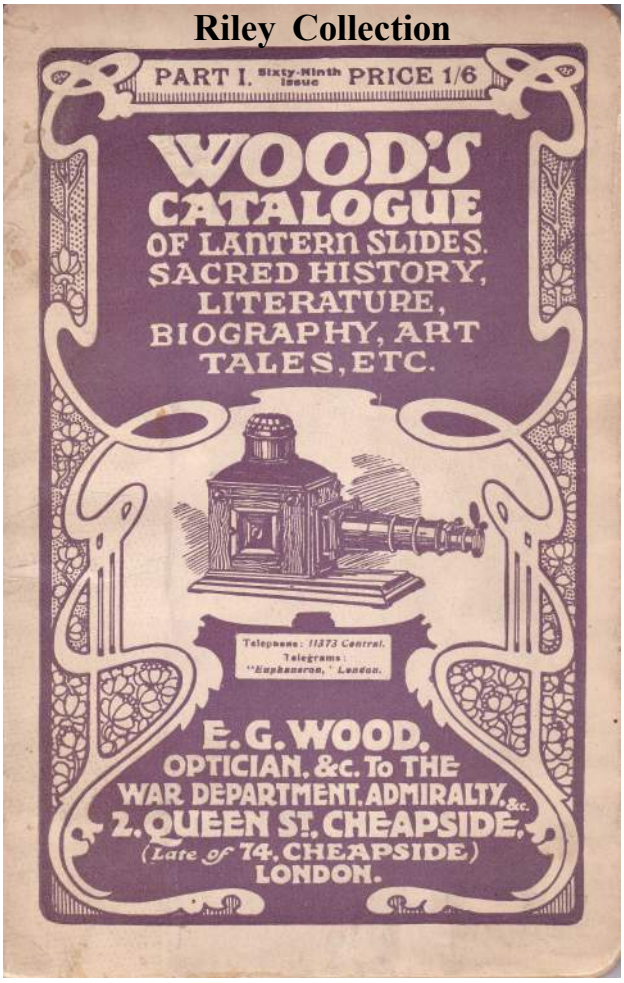
3. Wagenaar, Duller and Wagenaar-Fischer: "Dutch Perspectives", The Magic Lantern Society, London 2014.

4. Ibid.

Samuel Pepys as painted by John Greenhill, a pupil of the famous Peter Lely of London, circa 1669.

Samuel Pepys' lantern may have looked a little like this.

Riley Collection



On the inside front cover you will see a letter to Riley and Riley of 21 St Stephens Place, New Dorp, Staten Island NY from the firm of E G Wood of London dated August 7th 1929.

Edward George Wood was born in 1811 and trained as a wood-carver, being employed as such in several City churches and at Windsor Castle. He became a scientific instrument maker together with his brothers and in the 1830s was known as a specialist lens grinder. The firm was known to have sold magic lanterns. Leaving the business in the hands of his brothers Henry and George, Edward became a manager of Horne and Thornthwaite in Newgate Street, London. He brought out the Euphaneron lantern and is credited with inventing the first vertical (bi-unial) double lantern. The firm became known as Horne, Thornthwaite & Wood. Later he ran his own business at 117 Cheapside, his son, A A Wood, carrying on the business after Edward's death in 1895.

Tips on Giving Magic Lantern Shows

by Terry Borton

Editor's Note: *This article concludes a series of short Tips on how to improve your magic-lantern shows. Terry Borton's American Magic Lantern Theater (AMLT) has given more than a thousand shows over the last 25 years, from Podunk to Lincoln Center. He says he's also made a thousand mistakes, and hopes these Tips will help you make a few less.*

Getting Gigs

Getting bookings, is obviously a critical part of your success as a Magic Lantern performer. If you remember my first article in this series, I mentioned four levels of performing. The strategy for getting bookings is different for each. (My apologies for using myself in most of these illustrations. That's all I have.)

Family and Friends. Easy Peasy. Relaxed, no pay, no pain. This is a great place to learn the basics of your show. Invite as many F&Fs as you can, and perform as often as you can. Solicit their feedback. Listen. Try out their suggestions.

Our family watching a show. They "participate" a lot, making all kinds of rude remarks. Excellent practice!

Small Informal Shows. (small historical societies, retirement communities, libraries) The atmosphere is relaxed. You don't get paid much ($100-$200) if at all, and they don't expect too much. But this is where you can perform before strangers, and see how they respond. Be sure to collect comments from your sponsors and use them in your PR. How do you get bookings? Word of mouth helps. Call, especially small historical societies, smaller retirement communities. They are always looking for interesting evenings, and every town has them, so you have a large pool to swim in. Libraries are more professional; they'll want to know you won't embarrass them, so build a rep with the first two groups first.

Debbie and I, in our younger days, giving a small show, perhaps at a Society event.

Small Professional Shows. (Larger historical societies, small museums, schools, small festivals.) You might get $500. To get bookings, you'll need a record of success with the Informal Shows. Make up a flyer explaining what you do, and how it was received. (Those glowing comments from your earlier shows.) Include some good pictures. Develop a short video. It's time to have a website, if you don't already have one. Then call, explain your show, ask if you can send a flyer, follow up. Look for opportunities to be an "add on," tying your show into another event like a festival. Getting bookings won't be easy. Now you're dealing with professionals who have a reputation to uphold.

It used to be that getting booking with schools was reasonably easy. You'd call the school; they're refer you to the PTA contact, you'd make your pitch. I suspect that things have become much more difficult recently, because anything with schools has become so

fraught. Study your state's curriculum and adapt your show to reinforce it. Try a few pitches and see what happens.

You can also begin reaching out to professional booking conferences. Most states have conferences of some sort. Explore your state's Cultural Arts website; give them a call; find out what they offer. In some states all you can do is get on a list of performers; others have curated lists where you must meet certain criteria to be included; others sponsor big booking conferences. Before you try to exhibit at one of these conferences, visit. Check out the scene; talk to those manning the booths, talk to presenters. ("Presenters" is a confusing term. It means those who sponsor or present shows, like venue managers, not those who, like you, perform a show and are the ones in the booths at such shows.)

Deb waiting for the audience to get seated in a larger show.

Larger Professional Show. Now we're into major city historical societies, large museums and festivals, theaters. Prices range from $1000 to $5000. You aren't going to be able to get these kinds of bookings without a substantial record, because you're now competing with every other form of professional entertainment in the country. And if you do get such a booking, your show has to be top notch. You'll need a lot of experience under your belt.

There are various regional and national booking conferences that are appropriate at this level. You can find out more about them here: https://artsandmuseums.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Regional-Performing-Arts-Booking-Conferences.pdf

These conferences are not cheap. What with travel, hotel rooms, registration fees, union fees, etc. the costs can run between $2,000-3,000, up to $5,000 for APAP (Association of Performing Arts Professionals) at their national conference in NYC. Before you consider booking a booth, attend as a visitor. And in particular, don't get a booth at APAP until you have experience at the cheaper regional conferences. A lot of starry-eyed performers have lost a lot of money by going to APAP before they were ready.

At these conferences you will have a booth, and also the opportunity, at additional costs, to "showcase" — that is, to actually present your show before the folks who might hire you. I've always found these showcases to be very high-pressure events. If you screw up, and I have, you jinx yourself for a long time with important people. But the flip side is also true: Presenters can actually see what you can do, and if you're good, some will be interested.

So . . . know your skill and experience level, learn by performing, build slowly and steadily, and as you grow, enjoy yourself and your unique and wonderful art.

A show early in our career, in a 2,000-seat theater. You can barely see us performing at bottom center. You can't see the audience either, because there were only about 20 of them. Pretty depressing. This is an example of a time when we got ahead of ourselves, rather than building skills and audience slowly, over the years.

This is the last of these "Tips." I hope you've found them useful. If you want to perform and have questions, don't hesitate to call me. I'll be glad to help if I can.

Call Terry on 860-508-2265. Bear in mind he is on Eastern Time, so please be considerate!

Riley Collection - H Percival Riley's Cars

Discovered in the Riley archive are details of the vehicles Percival had during his business days. A collection of vehicle Certificates of Registration turned up in a file labelled Automobile, the earliest, dated 1932, refers to a 1929 Plymouth sedan. Whether he purchased it new in 1929 or second hand in 1932 is not known.

It appears that Percy did not keep this vehicle very long, as the next Certificate, dated 1935, refers to a 1935 Ford Fordor Model 48 sedan, and there is a receipt from Payne Motor Company of NY dated March 28th 1935 for supplying it.

Mr Riley kept this car until 1941, when it was replaced by a 1938 Dodge Model D-8 sedan.

The Dodge only lasted for a year, as it was replaced by a 1940 De Soto in 1942 until 1944, after which no further certificates are extant. One should point out that these images are not of the actual vehicles owned by Percival.

The Purposes of The Society shall be:

To establish an organization of people and entities interested in the collection, possession, conservation, restoration and maintenance of Magic Lanterns, Lantern Slides and related materials;

To encourage members to share their knowledge of Magic Lanterns, Lantern Slides and related materials with any interested persons or entities;

To coordinate research, catalogue material and disseminate information about the history, uses, development and preservation of Magic Lanterns and Lantern Slides; and

To promote exhibitions and/or shows utilizing Magic Lanterns, Lantern Slides and related equipment, in known methods of use in as historically accurate a manner as possible.

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Note: As a Society, MLS does not give valuations nor takes responsibility for advice or guidance, nor implies any form of guarantee for the accuracy or consequences arising from information so given.

The Magic Lantern Calendar – July 2023

Events

July 6-9, 2023, ***Alice in Wonderland,*** real vintage magic lantern show using a rare complete set of projector slides from 1905, Duston Community Centre, Pendle Road, Northampton, NN6 6DT UK.

July 22, 2023, ***Summer Meeting 2023,*** Magic Lantern Society, Lacey Green Millenium Hall, Main Road, Lacey Green HP27 0QN, Buckinghamshire, England, UK.

Sept. 16, 2023, ***James Burgess's Magic Lantern Show,*** showing sculptures and props including a complete original Alice in Wonderland magic lantern set from 1905, Hastings Steampunk Festival, White Rock Theatre, White Rock, Hastings, East Sussex, TN34 1JX, England, UK.

Oct. 14, 2023, ***Autumn meeting 2023,*** Magic Lantern Society, The Birmingham and Midland Institute, 9 Margaret Street, Birmingham B3 3BS, England, UK.

Exhibits

Through Aug. 13, 2023, ***Light Images in Chinese Contemporary Art,*** a new genealogy of the slide and its legacy on the foundational years of Chinese contemporary art, UCCA Beijing, 798 Art District, No. 4 Jiuxianqiao Road, Chaoyang District 100015 Beijing, China

Through August, ***Making the Modern World: A Century+ of Progress,*** based on the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, includes magic lantern, Brick Store Museum, 117 Main Street, Kennebunk, ME.

Through Sept. 17, 2023, ***Sarah Sze: The Waiting Room,*** video sculpture / phantasmagoria, Peckham Rye Station, London, UK.

Through Dec. 2026, ***The Story of the Moving Image,*** includes shadow puppets, Victorian-era magic lanterns, original cameras and more, Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Fed Square, Melbourne, Australia https://www.acmi.net.au/whats-on/story-of-the-moving-image-exhibition/ .

Ongoing, ***The Path to Cinema: Highlights from the Richard Balzer Collection,*** Academy Museum of Motion Pictures, Los Angeles CA USA. 9,000 magic lantern objects collected by former MLS president Richard Balzer. https://www.academymuseum.org/en/exhibitions/path-to-cinema

Online

Magic Lantern Performing Group, Improve your skills every other Wednesday on Zoom. Contact Terry Borton: tborton@magiclanternshows.com

De Luikerwaal Dutch Virtual Museum, https://www.luikerwaal.com/ Magic lantern history, pictures, stories.

Lucerna – the Magic Lantern Web Resource, online database collaboration covering all aspects of magic lanterns. http://lucerna.exeter.ac.uk/

The Museum of American Magic Lantern Shows, 5-minute intro, 10-minute Highlights Tour, 30-minute In-Depth Tour and Kids' Page. www.magiclanternmuseum.com

To add your magic lantern show, exhibition, or other event to our calendar, or to list your show for potential bookings, drop a line to briandrogers@gmail.com.

Classified Advertisements

Wants

WANTED

English collector looking for figurines depicting itinerant lanternists and peepshowmen – examples shown here.

If you have any such pieces that you would like to sell please contact *Mike Smith – kime1944@gmail.com*

Wants

For Sale

Reproduction full-size Zoetrope with six long images and one circular one. Height 14", drum diameter 11 3/8", on turned mahogany base. $200.00.
For more info please contact the Editors.

This page available to members for Sales or Wants. Please contact the Editors

Rhodes Opera House Fire Revisited

In the year of the 125th Anniversary of the Tragedy

Ron Easterday with research assistance by Dorothy Easterday
April 2023

Contents

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    The Blame
Endnotes

Introduction

2023 marks the 125th anniversary of the Rhodes Opera House tragedy in Boyertown, Pennsylvania. This event has been mentioned in prior ML Bulletins and Gazettes before [1], however given the span of time it seems fitting to remember those who lost their lives and those who survived the tragic event by not forgetting their history.

The access of digital materials and search options has made additional resources available to further understand the event. There are numerous, often conflicting, accounts of the event that can be easily found on the web; by transcribing some of the first-hand reports the reader can form their own opinion of the events.

The Traveling Pageants of Mrs. H. E. Monroe

The evening was a presentation of a traveling pageant, a mix of live performers and magic lantern slides that were produced by Mrs. H.E. Monroe. Mrs. Monroe was a lecturer and educator in addition to producing magic lantern pageants. Following her father Reverend David Earhart as a missionary to Kansas in 1860, she funded and opened a private school in Atchison Kansas in 1870 which grew to a college of over 200 students annually. She moved to Washington, DC in 1885 and began lecturing in 1888. [2] [3] She traveled to Europe to obtain magic lantern slides, including from Levy of Paris "the best slide maker in the world" [4] and to get ideas for costumes, visiting the Palais de Costume at the Paris Exposition in 1900 and having Scottish soldiers' suites made in Glasgow Scotland for $ 400. [5]

From newspaper reports, her traveling shows were operated thus: Enlist the sponsorship of a local church, recruit church members and prominent local citizens as volunteers to portray acting roles, male/female choruses, and vocal soloists, rehearse them for a week or two under the tutelage of her assistant Miss. S. Ethel Brown, [6] [7] then stage the production at a local Opera house over two days, while narrating the slides herself. *The English Reformation,* the *s*tory of Oliver Cromwell, ran 2-1/2 hours with "one hundred or more of the leading talent of the town" in costumes performing, Mrs. Monroe lecturing in four acts, with "75 superb stereopticon views" shown between the live portions of the pageant. [7] Mrs. Monroe provided the costumes: elaborate and gorgeous, of silks, satins, and velvets, costing nearly $ 3,000," [7] lantern slides, lantern, lanternist, and herself, then split the gross revenue with the sponsoring church, typically 85% for Mrs. Monroe/15% for the church. [12]

Harriet Earhart Monroe
A Woman of the Century, 1893

Indeed, Mrs. Monroe's life story and traveling magic lantern pageants would be an interesting research project in its own right for someone to undertake. [2] [3] [8] [9]

Rhodes Opera House Fire

In one of the great theater/magic lantern show tragedies, it was at her production of *The Scottish Reformation* on January 13, 1908 at the Rhodes Opera House, Boyertown, Pennsylvania, that resulted in a devastating fire that killed 170 men, women and children, over 50% of the audience, and nearly 10 % of the town's entire population, 25 of which could not be identified and are buried in a mass grave at Fairview Cemetery in Boyertown. [10] [11] [12]

The Rhodes Opera house was a three story, wood frame building. The first floor was shops; the second the auditorium, with two offices at the front; the third floor with a dressing room and lodge space.

While the initial cause of the fire was apparently the upsetting of a kerosene lamp on the stage, followed by upsetting a tank of kerosene that fed the footlights, not the magic lantern per se, it was said the loud hissing of the lantern gasses for the calcium lamp by an inexperienced lanternist started the initial panic, causing the accident on stage, which quickly engulfed the stage curtain[12] Two reputable sources and statements made at the inquest suggest that the lanternist either did not re-connect the gas hose that became loose or failed to close a gas valve on the loose hose, allowing lighter-than-air hydrogen [13] to accumulate at the ceiling as survivors described an explosion. Many of the bodies were burned from the head down as a result. As bad as the kerosene fire on the stage and curtain were, this likely flashover event sealed the fate of many.

The reports transcribed below describe the problems with the exit stairs, and while there were two fire escapes, [14] they were at unmarked windows, [15] at just two of eight windows so you would have to guess the locations, with sills three and one-half feet above the floor, and blocked by extra chairs brought in for the event. At the inquest it was stated the law required fire escape landings within two inches of the window sill on the exterior, but said nothing about how high the sill could be above the inside floor. The stage curtain was of plain, untreated muslin. "Reference is also made to the plaster

ceiling of the hall which had fallen down and was replaced with boards which were varnished." [16] Nearly everything was against the cast and audience surviving.

As a result, this event and other notable theater tragedies led to what we take for granted in places of assembly today due to our building codes: Exit doors that swing out, not in; multiple exits sized for the full occupant capacity; exit devices, i.e. "panic bars" on doors; lighted exit signs, fire resistant projection booths, and fire-retardant curtains/furnishings. [17] [18] [19] This production was the first and last of the lanternist, and the last of Ms. Monroe's 25 year career as a pageant producer.

Memorials and Resources

While there have been memorials over the years, The Boyertown Historical Society has hosted an annual memorial of the victims since 2013. For photos and an account of the 125th anniversary of the tragedy, see the *Reading Eagle*, January 16, 2023. [20]

Photos of the building before and after the fire, and as it stands today, may be viewed online. [11] This posting contains some a description of the events at odds with other reports, but is a good overall accounting of the events.

Another extensive, detailed writeup, with links to other publications, is an interesting read and presented by a member of the fire service, so adds that knowledge and perspective. [21] It includes details I have not found elsewhere, more photos, and even a vintage hand sketch of the auditorium floor plan. It varies in places from other descriptions of the events. But as is noted, and makes sense, that at the inquest none of the survivor's stories matched; there was simply so much confusion and panic that events were remembered differently, rendering it impossible to give a single, definitive account of the event. So I offer the following extracts from articles published soon after the fire from which you can draw your own conclusions.

Newspaper Accounts - The Start of the Fire

The tragedy caught the entire nation's attention, with reports on the front page of *The New York Times*. First it was reported "a moving picture film caught fire" and first hand report of "The machine was apparently operating smoothly. Then, without warning, there was a terrible explosion. It seemed to shake the building," but this proved to be in error. [22]

The Reverend Adam M. Weber, pastor St. John's Lutheran Church, under whose auspices the play was given, was sitting in the front row and gave this first-hand account "Suddenly there came a hiss from the rear of the house, where the stereopticon lantern was placed. Immediately all the people around arose to see what was the matter. The curtain was then lowered, and when the people on the stage heard the noises they raised it. Just then a wave of the crowd broke upon the stage and, together with the raising of the curtain, upset the tank of oil [kerosene] which fed the eight burners used for footlights. Two of the burners immediately began for blaze up. I threw one of the little girls with me upon the stage and then followed her myself. Raising a cap, I started to beat out the flames, which were shooting from the two burners. Some one [sic] threw down a piece of carpet and tried to assist in extinguishing the fire. When the blaze got beyond control four men and myself tried to lift the oil tank, and throw it out the window. The heat of the fire, however, had melted the soldering, and the whole blazed up in a burst of flame that shot up to the ceiling. There was no chance of saving the building now." [23]

Mr. Schmoyer, whose wife died in the fire testified “The young man giving the performance put in the wrong picture. The women told him so. He changed the picture. Then there was a hissing sound. Next the piano lamp fell to the floor. I picked up a piece of carpet and assisted in the work of extinguishing the fire caused by the overturned footlights” echoing similar testimony “Someone pulled up the curtain and just then the lamp standing upon the piano toppled to the floor. Then the tank of the footlights fell over and spread oil that caught fire. Then I heard an explosion” and “I … ran to a window, opened it with the intention of throwing out the burning footlight tank. This occupied perhaps two minutes. When I grasped the tank there was a sudden flash, intense heat, and tremendous flame.[24]

Newspaper Accounts - The Fight to Escape

The auditorium had one main entry stair with in-swinging doors at the top and no landing. A second stair led from rear of the space, but was not visible to the audience or known to many except the actors on stage, and almost immediately the curtain caught fire which prevented anyone from the audience to access the second stair even if they had known of it. Unfortunately, this rear stair was open the third floor and acted like a chimney, sealing the fate of those in the third floor dressing room. Reports vary with the main stair reported as between six feet [12] and six and one-half fee wide [26] but at the bottom the box office narrowed the exit to just three feet wide. The rear stair was reported as between just two feet and two-feet eight inches wide. [25]

Early reports were that the entry stair doors were bolted shut “several of those who escaped from the auditorium say that the doorkeeper became so interested in the tableau that he bolted the doors, to prevent entrance of a crowd of Italians who had assembled about the entrance, and took a rear seat, where he could enjoy the show.” It was at the head of the flight of stairs guarded by the swinging exit doors that the loss of life was greatest. ”A big German who encountered the locked entrance door pounded against it with his fists. Others fumbled for the bolt. The door stood firm. The German pinned his shoulder against the door but it did not give. It was only when the crowd had pressed those next to the door forward with tremendous force that the door gave way and the foremost were thrown down the steep steps.” The momentum of the crowd carried others over the brink, and threw them on top of the scrambling heap at the bottom. At least a score was trampled to death in the struggle to regain their footing at the bottom of the steps. The mass of bodies obstructed the stair and prevented those in the rear from getting out. [23] Other reports at the inquest describe only the “left hand door bolted” [26] of the two inswing doors being locked, but regardless, the damage was done.

There were two fire escape at windows from the second floor and one from the third. “Several years ago…a State Inspector visited the Opera House and looked it over. He ordered that fire-escapes be erected on both sides of the building. This was done and the Inspector then said that the building was satisfactory.” [23]

This was echoed by at statement by Dr. Thomas A. Rhodes, the owner of the building, “that it had been inspected and passed by a state factory inspector after he had given a contract for fire escapes to a Reading man” and “that the factory inspectors told him from whom he should buy his fire escapes, that he placed the order with the Reading contractor, and that the inspector passed the building.” [27]

The middle section of chairs were screwed to the floor, but loose chairs were brought in for extra seating. In the panic, “Men used the chair which had entangled their feet as weapons with which to clear a way to the open. Several woman say that they saw men respected in the community raise the chairs high over their heads and bring them down with crushing force on the heads of women and children.” [23] This may well have been true, for “The ratio of [the dead] women and girls to men and boys is about nine to one,” [28] with 130 of the 170 dead women and children. [29]

Newspaper Accounts - The Blame

Five parties were blamed at various points for the tragedy: Harry W. Fisher, the stereopticon operator; Dr. Thomas A. Rhodes, the owner of the building; Mr. H. E. Mauger, the lessee of the building; Mrs. H. E. Monroe, the producer of the pageant; and Deputy Factory Inspector Harry Bechtel. A two-day inquest was held staring on January 29, 1908 with the coroner’s jury holding two of the five responsible:

“We find the primary causes thereof to have been the employment by Mrs. Harriet E. Monroe, of an inexperienced and incompetent operator of the calcium light, in the person of Henry Fisher, and the laxity of the Deputy Factory Inspector of the district, and the Department of Factory Inspection of the State of Penn’s [sic] in its failure to enforce proper and adequate fire escapes and fire appliances, as well as its failure to enforce existing laws insuring public safety. We request the prosecuting attorney of Berks county to arrest and, if possible, convict, Mrs. Harriet E. Monroe and Harry McC Bechtel, the Deputy Factory Inspector of this district, on the charge of criminal negligence.” [30]

But District Attorney Schaeffer never prosecuted anyone, “because the laws are too defective to sustain any charges.” Another article reported the odd statement “The apparent attempt to make scapegoats of outsiders is not approved by the district attorney.” In the end, no one was held responsible or provided any restitution to the families of the victims. Let us examine the five possible responsible parties. [31]

The Lanternist, or the Stereopticon Operator

Later reports stated that the gas tanks of the stereopticon machine exploded, but the operator, Henry W. Fisher was quoted “I must have turned the wrong valve. There was a long drawn out hissing sound that frightened the women and children. Several of them jumped up and screamed and ran toward the stage. The curtain was down. I don’t know what happened next. I was caught in a mop of crazy people. I was knocked down and trampled on. I struggled along. I was badly burned. I feel that I am responsible for this tragic affair.” [27]

But this story changed, with the next day Fisher being quoted “As god as my witness, I am not to blame for this terrible thing. I did not cause the deaths of those poor people and if they want to arrest me I can be found at my home at any time. But I am innocent. I did not turn the wrong valve of the gas tube as has been reported. There was no explosion of any tank either before or after the panic. The tanks themselves are still intact. There is not a rent of a hole in either of them. Just as Mrs. Mayers was finishing her lectures, for which I was throwing views on the screen, a valve on the tube leading from the oxygen tank become loose, There was a puffing sound and then a hiss. I [seized?] my monkey wrench and in an instant tightened the valve. The noises immediately stopped. I was then amazed to see people climbing upon the stage. I shouted at the audience: ‘There is no danger, there is no danger’.” [32]

Reports followed that Fisher "had had only two days instruction in handling the calcium light, and that he operated the machine in public for the first time on that fatal night." [28]

Testifying at the inquest, Fred. S. Murray, president of the New York Calcium Light Company, the company that sold the gas for the event, said that a calcium light operator needed three months training. [12]

But countering this, C.T. Mulligan of Philadelphia testified "Fisher was brought here by Mrs. Della Mayers, the women who was conducting the entertainment, and she asked that we instruct Fisher to run the stereopticon. He came in on the two following days, and he must have worked for more than two hours a day. It is a very simple thing to operate one of these machines and when Fisher went away we were sure he mastered the workings." "It is not unusual for us to send men out of here to operate stereopticon machines with 15 minutes of practice" [26]

Dr. Thomas A. Rhodes, Building Owner

There were allegations against Dr. Rhodes that the building was unsafe, but apparently his testimony at the inquest prevailed as he stated the required fire escapes were installed. He was considered partly responsible for allowing the use of kerosene footlamps, but the inquest jury did not indite him.

Following the lack of action by District Attorney Schaeffer, two husbands of wives that died in the fire, Addison Schmoyer and Frank Cullen, filed suit against Rhodes for violating the State Fie Escape Laws. [33] Rhodes was due to be tried in September of 1908, with it reported in September 21, 1908 that a Grand Jury found "a true bill against Dr. Thomas J. B. Rhodes. Mrs. Harriet E. Monroe already indited. Cases likely be tried at the next term of court." [34]

The saga continued with attorneys for Dr. Rhodes arguing the charges be dropped on technical grounds, "not an indictable offence" in April of 1909. [35] Finally, on May 5, 1910 Rhodes was found not guilty when witnesses "declared no explosion would have occurred had the operator of the calcium light machine stuck to his post after the fire broke out, or even turned off the tubes properly. This ends all other suites against Dr. Rhodes." [36] This verdict might suggest attention be returned to Henry Fisher, but no evidence has been found that he was accused at this late date, over two years after the fire.

Mr. H. E. Mauger, the lessee of the building

Mr. Mauger was also considered partly responsible for allowing the use of kerosene footlamps, but the inquest jury did not indite him. The claim was made that the building should have been equipped with gas lighting, not kerosene, with Mr. East, Secretary of the gas company testifying "The gas pipe was laid into the building. That is the pipe was there but was not connected up. The gas was turned on May 20, 1907," [24] a full eight months before the fire. But nothing came of this argument.

Mrs. H. E. Monroe, the producer of the pageant

Mrs. Monroe, producer of the traveling religious pageants, was not at the performance. She typically narrated the portions of the pageant with the slides, but being 70 years old and having troubles with her voice, she had her younger sister Della Mayers lecture that evening. Della died in the fire. The

production was also without one of Mrs. Monroe's regular lanternists, resulting in the services of the inexperienced Harry W. Fisher, causing her inditement. The tragedy devastated her and she never produced another pageant. At the inquest it was reported that Della Mayers wrote to Mrs. Monroe's regular lanternist that she was concerned Fisher was "incompetent" asking for him to perform instead, to which he declined. A damming letter from Mrs. Monroe came out where she instructed her regular lanternist to say, if anyone asked, that Fisher had eight years' experience, clearly a false statement. [12]

Later in September of 1908, a warrant to arrest Mrs. Harriet E. Monroe was issued by Reading Magistrate Bruce, sworn out by former County Commissioner Frank Moyer, of Boyertown whose 17-year-old daughter was one of the victims, charging her with criminal negligence "for the employment of incompetent help at the moving picture lamp". "The case goes before the Grand Jury next Wednesday" [37] There has been no record found that Mrs. Monroe was indited or tried in connection with this warrant.

Deputy Factory Inspector Harry Bechtel

Harry Bechtel was found responsible for his "failures" including allowing the use of kerosene footlights, and for not requiring the sills at the fire escapes to be lowered and marked on the inside, although these were not State requirements at the time. Mr. Bechtel was chastised at the inquisition that he did not make regular inspections of the theater, indeed admitting he had only returned to see that the fire escapes were installed from the exterior "My duty ended with the erection of the fire escapes…". Clearly flustered at all the acquisitions, Bechtel exclaimed "I have more important places to go than a measly little place like Boyertown." [12] Obviously this did nothing to gain him sympathy, with Mr. Young, attorney for the coroner, saying in his closing remarks: "Maybe this Penn'a [sic] German borough … is located along a 'Jerkwater' railroad, but it is within eight miles of the home of the Deputy Factory Inspector, and there is no reason why the citizens of Boyertown should not be protected to the fullest extent of the State Factory Inspectors Department. We may be Penn'a [sic] Germans, but we are honest, stoic, and fair, and we will not sacrifice the lives of our people if we can help it." [26]

Endnotes

[1] *MLB*, Vol 2, No 4, January 1981, page 8, *Here and There, the Editor's Scrapbook*, short writeup by editor LWW; MLG Vol 11, No 3, Fall 1999, pages 16-17, article based on Reading Eagle newspaper account; *MLG* Vol 27 No 2-3, Page 26, Summer/Fall 2015,page 26, Table of illustrated lecturers, Mrs. Delia Mayers; *ePub* June 2017, page 6, response to a question, refers to Wikipedia article.

[2] *Women's Who's Who of America 1914-1915*, The American Commonwealth Company, 1914, page 571.

[3] *A Woman of the Century Fourteen Hundred Biographical Sketches Accompanied by Portraits of Leading American Women in All Walks of Life*, Charles Wells Moulton, 1893, page 512.

[4] *The Cameron County Press* [Emporium , PA], Volume 40, No 2, March 2, 1905, Page 1.

[5] *The Cameron County Press* [Emporium , PA], Volume 38, No 29, September 10, 1903, Pages 1 and 5.

[6] *The Cameron County Press* [Emporium , PA], Volume 38, No 27, August 27, 1903, Page 4.

[7] *The Cameron County Press* [Emporium , PA], Volume 38, No 28, September 3, 1903, Page 1.

[8] *The Methodist Review,* Volume XCVII – Fifth Series, Volume XXXI, William V. Kelley, L.H.D. editor, The Methodist Book Concern, pages 169-172, a 3-1/2 page book review of *Twice-Born Men in America* by Harriet Earhart Monroe, Lutheran Publication Society, Philadelphia.

[9] For other writings by Mrs. Monroe, see *The Pageant of Protestantism Celebrating the Quadricentennial of the Reformation*, the Lutheran Publication Society, 1917; *History of the Life of Gustavus Adolphus II The Hero-General of the Reformation*, The Lutheran Publication Society, 1910; *Washington its Sights and Insights*, Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909; *Past 30*, 1878, *The Art of Conversation, 1889*; *Historical Lutheranism*, and *Heroine of the Mining Camp*.

[10] Author's photo, Fairview Cemetery, Boyertown, PA, August 2, 2011, "The Unidentified".

[11] Photos of the building before and after the fire, and as it stands today, may be viewed at

https://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/literary-cultural-heritage-map-pa/feature-articles/trapped-third-act-rhoads-opera-house-fire. This posting contains some conflicting information in the text regarding what happened, but is still provides a detailed account worth reading.

[12] *Midwinter Mourning The Boyertown Opera House Fire*, Mary Jane Schneider, MJS Publications, Volume I, 1991, and *A Town in Tragedy The Boyertown Opera House Fire*, Volume II, 1992.

[13] Despite Fisher's claim the oxygen hose/valve was loose, oxygen likely would have safely dispersed, unlike hydrogen which rose to the ceiling. In the dark, with just two days training, it is easy to understand Fisher might not have known which hose was loose.

[14] The building built in 1884, originally had two iron ladders at the windows. The fire escapes were added in 1904. *The Reading Eagle* [Reading, PA], May 3, 1908, page 6.

[15] It was reported at the inquest by the State Factory Inspector that "The fire escape people furnish the signs", but apparently none were installed and "That there is no law to compel people to post exit notices.". *The Reading Eagle* [Reading, PA], January 30, 1908 page 8.

[16] *The Reading Eagle* [Reading, PA], July 14, 1908, page 1.

[17] To name just two other tragedies, reference the Richmond Theatre Fire of 1811 with 72 deaths, primarily due to combustible curtains and wall hangings and The Iroquois Theater Fire, Chicago, 1903, started with combustible curtains and led to 602 deaths due to inadequate exits and lack of a sprinkler system. This tragedy inspired a hardware salesman, Carl Prinzler, who had tickets for the Iroquois that evening but missed attending that fatal night, combined with architect Henry DuPont and the Clemens Vonnegut hardware company, to patent the first practical panic device for exit doors in 1908 under the trade name Von Duprin, which continues as a major manufacturer of exit devices today.

[18] All building codes in the United States are modeled after the *International Building Code*, reference Chapter 6 *Interior Finishes* and Chapter 10 *Means of Egress* for typical requirements, see International Code Council, https://codes.iccsafe.org/content/IBC2018P5.

[19] *The Story Behind Von Duprin*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNIJ1ToOHtg and *How it All Began* https://idighardware.com/2009/05/how-it-all-began/ for an article written by Carl Prinzle in the 1930's.

[20] https://www.readingeagle.com/2023/01/16/victims-of-1908-boyertown-opera-house-fire-remembered-3/.

[21] https://disasteroushistory.blogspot.com/2019/08/. This includes photos after the fire and a sketched floor plan of the theater.

[22] *The New York Times* [New York, NY], January 14, 1908, pages 1-2.

[23] *The New York Times* [New York, NY], January 15, 1908, pages 1-2.

[24] *The Reading Eagle* [Reading, PA], May 3, 1908, page 6.

[25] *The Reading Eagle* [Reading, PA], May 2, 1908, page 1 and July 14, 1908, page 1.

[26] The Reading Eagle [Reading, PA], January 30, 1908, page 8.

[27] *New York Tribune* [New York, NY], January 29, 1908, page 4.

[28] *The Afro-American Ledger* [Baltimore, MD], January 18, 1908, page 2.

[29] *The Daily Star* [Fredricksburg, VA], January 18, 1908, page number illegible.

[30] *The Reading Eagle* [Reading, PA], January 30, 1908, page 1.

[31] *Montour American* [Danville, PA], February 7 and March 5, 1908, page 1.

[32] *The Sun* [New York, NY], January 16, 1908, page 2, and *The New York Times*, January 16, 1908, page 7.

[33] *The Reading Eagle* [Reading, PA], May 2, 1908, page 1 and July 14, 1908, page 1; *The Easton Free Press* [Easton, PA], June 20, 1908, page 1.

[34] *The Daily Star* [Fredricksburg, VA], September 21, 1908, page number illegible.

[35] *The Reading Eagle* [Reading, PA], March 12, 1909, page 6.

[36] *The Trenton True American* [Trenton, NJ], May 6, 1910, page 2.

[37] *The Philadelphia Record* [Philadelphia, PA], September 12, 1908, page 6.